The New Criterion

January 1994

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Editor *Hilton Kramer*
Publisher *Samuel Lipman*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Associate Editor *Christopher Carduff*
Office Manager *Marjorie Danser*
Editorial Intern *Sarah Bright*

Contributors to this issue

Brooke Allen wrote about Wilkie Collins for our December issue.

Marc M. Arkin, associate professor of law at Fordham University, holds a Ph.D. in American religion from Yale.

James Bowman is the American editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement* and the film critic of *The American Spectator*.

Joseph Epstein is editor of *The American Scholar*. His latest book is *Pertinent Players: Essays on the Literary Life* (Norton).

Mark Falcoff is Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

Eric Gibson's monograph on Clement Meadmore will be published in March by Hudson Hills Press.

Dana Gioia's verse translation of *Hercules Furens* will appear in *Seneca: The Tragedies*, Volume II, forthcoming from the Johns Hopkins University Press.

John Gross is the theater critic of the London *Sunday Telegraph*. His most recent book is *Shylock: A Legend & Its Legacy* (Simon & Schuster).

Roger Kimball's book, *Tenured Radicals*, is now available in paperback from HarperPerennial.

Samuel Lipman's latest book is *Music & More* (Northwestern University Press).

Donald Lyons is the regular theater critic of *The New Criterion*.

Jeremy Murray-Brown, a former producer for BBC Television, teaches in the College of Communications at Boston University.

Alan Rutenberg is a free-lance writer living in Chicago.

John Simon reviews theater for *New York* magazine and films for *National Review*.

Karen Wilkin wrote about Emily Carr for last month's issue of *The New Criterion*.

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Notes & Comments: January 1994

"Word work" in Stockholm

If she wrote just a little better, we might call Toni Morrison the Pearl S. Buck of contemporary letters. Like Buck before her, Morrison has made a magnificent literary career out of left-wing sermonizing and sentimentality. Pearl Buck wrote mistily of downtrodden peasants, especially those subsisting in China. Morrison is a bit different. Being (a) black, (b) female, and (c) a paid-up late-twentieth-century subscriber to academic political correctness, she plays the race-'n'-gender card wherever it can be played—which, in the world according to Morrison, is well-nigh everywhere. Heaving leftward paid off mightily for both writers. Morrison, again like Buck before her, has been showered with all manner of literary honors and awards. She scooped up the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for her novel *Beloved* and—just this fall—she found herself the recipient, as had Buck in the late 1930s, of that nonpareil of laurel crowns, the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The Nobel Prize? Toni Morrison and the Nobel Prize in Literature? It is, to be sure, a vertiginous thought. Frankly, though, with the example of Pearl Buck (and several other Nobelists) before us, we were disappointed but not surprised. We knew it could only be a matter of time before someone of Morrison's indisputable qualifications came to the attention of the Swedish Academy—someone, that is to say, who is (a) black, (b) female, and (c) a paid-up late-twentieth-century subscriber to academic political correctness. *The New York Times*, reporting recently on Morrison's acceptance speech in Stockholm, summed up the operative priorities when it noted that the new laureate was "the 90th person, the eighth woman, and the first black woman who won the prize."

As is increasingly often the case these days with the cultural reporting in the *Times*, the article on Morrison's triumph in Stockholm ought to have been accompanied by a large air-sickness bag. The emetic quality of the piece was due partly to the general smarminess of the article itself, partly to the passages quoted from Morrison's speech. Morrison—dressed, we were told, in a "black gown with sequins that reflected light from 13 chandeliers"—delivered what a spokesman for the Swedish Academy called a "prose poem" and the reporter for the *Times* called a "lovingly wrought paean to language and to the sublime vocation of 'word work.'" Sample 1 of the prose poem: "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives." Perhaps, ungrammatical though they are, these sentences are quoted out of context and so are unrepresentative. No such luck. Here is Sample 2 of the lovingly wrought paean, from the bit about some young

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people who entreat an old blind woman to tell them a story and, when she remains silent, begin the story for her:

> Tell us about ships turned away from shorelines at Easter, placenta in a field. Tell us about a wagonload of slaves, how they sang so softly their breath was indistinguishable from the falling snow. How they knew from the hunch of the nearest shoulder that the next stop would be their last. How with hands prayered in their sex, they thought of heat, then suns. . . .

It might have been a good thing if they had also thought of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein—especially of his warnings about how the "idling of language" leads to nonsense.

Of course, it is not only the poor quality of Morrison's writing that brought her to the satisfied attention of the Swedish Academy. There is also the matter of her politics. In awarding her the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Swedish Academy preened that Morrison "delves into the language itself, a language she wants to liberate from the fetters of race." If you can believe that, we have a large bridge, complete with a parcel of swampland in Florida, that we would be happy to sell you.

The truth is that all Morrison's work—her novels, her essays, her lectures—is saturated with divisive racial animus. This point was made by Heather Mac Donald in an incisive article in *The Wall Street Journal* (October 14, 1993) just after Morrison's Nobel coup was announced. Far from seeking to liberate language from race, Mac Donald notes, Morrison "insists obsessively on racial differences. She polarizes language itself into 'white discourse' and silenced black speech." Thus it is that Morrison's novels consistently depict blacks corrupted, brutalized, and oppressed by "whitepeople" (Morrison's spelling), while her critical writings are hermetic meditations on the unrecognized and consequently uncelebrated "Africanist presence" that has allegedly "shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history" of the United States. It has, indeed, shaped the whole of American culture, including, e.g., the novels of Ernest Hemingway and Henry James.

If your search through such works fails to discern much of an "Africanist presence," don't be alarmed: Morrison handles that little problem by explaining (in her revealingly titled book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*) that the Africanist presence can make itself known through "omissions," "contradictions," etc. In other words, the less it's there, the more it is there. "Even, and especially, when American texts are not 'about' Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom," Morrison explains, "the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation." Talk about having your cake and eating it, too!

You might have thought that the civil-rights movement and the general liberalization of American society had made important gains for blacks in this country: wrong again. "Racism," Morrison assures us in *Playing in the Dark*, "is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment." Likewise, in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*—a collection edited and with an introduction by Morrison—we learn that both Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas are victims of a universal white conspiracy to subjugate blacks, and especially black women, by perpetuating racist stereotypes about "the limits and excesses of black bodies."

Heather Mac Donald concludes her article by noting that Toni Morrison

> is working busily to dismantle the ideal of color-blindness. In its place she has erected an

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> insistent awareness of race . . . as the defining feature of the self. That this narrowing of the human spirit should be the goal of so many contemporary academics and writers is one of the more mystifying features of our time. That one of its exponents should be awarded a Nobel Prize bodes poorly for racial harmony.

We might add that it also bodes poorly for the recognition of literary excellence.

Alice Tully, 1902–1993

The death of Alice Tully in mid-December at the age of ninety-one prompts two kinds of sadness. The first is quite naturally a feeling of loss at the passing of a marvelously generous patron of music. The inheritor of a large but, by today's standards, hardly immense fortune, Miss Tully was a patron whose gifts were occasioned neither by a passion for the limelight nor by a desire to be on the list for celebrity social events. Her generosity stemmed from a profound love of the music she supported, and was informed by musical knowledge derived from a professional career as a singer, for which she had been rigorously trained.

Her patronage was by no means limited to the building of Tully Hall and the continuing support of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. She was, for example, the major patron of the "Musica Aeterna" orchestra series at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1960s, a series which, under the direction of Frederic Waldman, programmed little-heard but beautiful music of great interest to connoisseurs. It is significant, in this time of a universal loss of historical memory, that *The New York Times*, in its obituary, omitted the Waldman concerts from its list of Tully benefactions.

The other sadness we feel upon Alice Tully's death comes from a wish that her patronage had been able to serve a grander musical period than the one in which we still find ourselves as the twentieth century comes to a close. She was one of the last significant classical-music patrons of her kind, but hers was not a period that produced either the composers or the performers that had marked the earlier decades of this century. Ours has been more an age devoted to creating new institutions, and to this Alice Tully brought both her musical ideals and her generous patronage.

From the archives of the academy:

Our aim in this project is to complement what at present is known as "music theory" . . . with a multifaceted set of theoretical approaches. . . . For example, what effect would it have on analysis if we theorized music along the lines of Lacan? What does "queer theory" have to offer to the study of music? Has an analysis of the construction of gender roles fully informed our re-reading of 19th-century music? These and many other questions arising from an interaction between music and other disciplines such as anthropology, religious studies, gender and sexuality theory, literary criticism, computer science, sociology, philosophy and psychology are what we intend to explore in as much detail as possible with no preconceived notions of where our inquiry might stop.

From a call for fellowship applications distributed by the Humanities Research Institute at the University of California–Irvine for "Re-theorizing Music," a resident research group.

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"The Intellectuals & the Masses"

by Hilton Kramer

John Carey, the Merton Professor of English at Oxford University, has performed a remarkable feat. He has written a book called *The Intellectuals and the Masses* without once discussing Karl Marx.[1] It seems not to have occurred to the Merton Professor of English at Oxford that the writings of Karl Marx had something to do with the tradition of thinking about modern cultural life in terms of "intellectuals" and "the masses." The literature that derives from Marx in these matters is, except for some superficial references to the Frankfurt School and the usual obeisances to Walter Benjamin, of no apparent interest to the author of *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, either. If he has ever heard of the work of Max Weber or Joseph Schumpeter, he has chosen not to disturb his readers by mentioning what, if anything, he may have discovered in it. And it goes without saying—about a book of this kind, anyway—that nothing in the vast bibliography of American social thought in the twentieth century is allowed to violate the serene parochialism of the author's inquiry.

What is more surprising, however, is that Professor Carey is no better at identifying the specifically British antecedents of the intellectual inquiry he has embarked upon in *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. Indeed, the number of essential figures and ideas it has not occurred to Professor Carey to discuss in relation to his ostensible theme in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* comes close to constituting the largest part of his subject. You would have no way of knowing from the lectures that have been gathered in this book that, for example, Carlyle, Mill, Arnold, Ruskin, Newman, Bagehot, Morley, and sundry other Victorian eminences devoted a good deal of thought to the prehistory, as it were, of the cultural issues that Professor Carey has lately found to be of some importance to the intellectual life in the twentieth century. It is a measure of Professor Carey's historically myopic approach to the subject of *The Intellectuals and the Masses* that while he deems it appropriate to lavish attention upon Clive Bell's bantering adumbrations in *Civilisation*, he never even mentions a classic like Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. The result is a book devoid of cultural memory.

This is all the more remarkable in that four of the book's chapters are based on Professor Carey's T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at the University of Kent in 1989, and two others are drawn from his Henry James Lecture at the Rye Festival in 1990. Need one add that Eliot is one of the book's many intellectual villains, and James is never discussed? Reading *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, you would have every reason to suppose that the lectureships established in the names of these great writers were designed

1 *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939*, by John Carey; A Thomas Dunne Book/St. Martin's Press, 246 pages, $19.95.

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to voice disapproval of everything they stood for. But this is no different, really, from what has happened in recent years on this side of the Atlantic to the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard and the Lionel Trilling Seminars at Columbia. One could write a longer book than Professor Carey's on the way the universities—in Britain no less than in America—now honor the great figures of the past by traducing the achievements that are our principal reason for remembering them.

And in Professor Carey's case, it isn't as if he had neglected the weighty subjects appropriate to his theme in order to give us a close examination of the "mass culture" he is concerned to defend against the criticism of the "intellectuals" he has brought under indictment. For largely missing, too, from his account of the way intellectuals have responded to the rise of mass culture in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century are, among much else, Hollywood, radio, the picture press, pop music, and most other forms of popular entertainment.

In a brief "Postscript" to *The Intellectuals and the Masses* there is, to be sure, a paragraph devoted to television. For Professor Carey, "the advent of television, and the transference, at least in Europe and North America, from a predominantly written to predominantly televisual culture" marks a great advance in civilization. He mocks W. H. Auden for having said in 1972 that "I don't see how any civilized person can watch TV, far less own a set," and claims that "for the majority of people television has immensely extended the opportunity for knowledge," and that "it has also given the majority, in Britain at any rate, unprecedented access to traditional culture."

This is itself something of a paradox, if not something worse, for much of *The Intellectuals and the Masses* is devoted to slamming literary intellectuals for their defense of "traditional culture" in its untelevisual forms against the depredations of mass culture. But then, Professor Carey never troubles himself to examine what actually happens to "traditional culture" when it is reconstituted for the television public. It is enough for him to cite Kenneth Clark's "Civilisation" series as an example of what television can achieve, yet there is no acknowledgment that even this overrated series would now be impossible to produce in the same terms because of the way the imperatives of multiculturalism and political correctness have insinuated themselves into mass culture. This is a development to which British television is now as subject as its American counterpart, but it is not a development that Professor Carey condescends to acknowledge, much less discuss. About mass culture he is as upbeat as any executive at Time Warner or CBS—though far less knowledgeable, of course. It is the intellectuals who are vilified in *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, and vilified specifically for their resistance to mass culture. Indeed, for Professor Carey, the intellectuals he has placed under indictment —they range from H. G. Wells and George Gissing to T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and George Orwell down to George Steiner—are nothing more than a bunch of little Hitlers barking on about what "makes great art great" while undermining the popular culture of the masses.

When the reader comes to the last chapter of *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, he finds that Adolf Hitler is in fact upheld as a veritable symbol of "European intellectual orthodoxy." Professor Carey is nothing if not specific in providing us with an inventory of the convictions that, in his view, make Hitler an authentic representative of Western European opinion on all matters having to do with culture in the twentieth century:

> The contention, then, that Hitler's ideas on culture were trivial, half-baked and disgusting [a reference to Hugh Trevor-Roper's characterization of Hitler's views] can be allowed only if the same epithets are applied to numerous cultural ideas prevalent among English intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century, some of which are still espoused today.

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> The superiority of "high" art, the eternal glory of Greek sculpture and architecture, the transcendent value of the old masters and of classical music, the supremacy of Shakespeare, Goethe and other authors acknowledged by intellectuals as great, the divine spark that animates all productions of genius and distinguishes them from the low amusements of the mass—these were among Hitler's most dearly held beliefs. His contempt for "gutter journalism," advertising and "cinema bilge," his espousal of the aristocratic principle, and his comparison of the "dunderheaded multitude" with women and children, are other features that readers of this book will have no difficulty matching in intellectual discourse. To such readers, his various rewritings of the mass—as exterminable subhumans, as an inhibited bourgeois herd, as noble workers, as a peasant pastoral—will also be familiar intellectual devices. The tragedy of *Mein Kampf* is that it was not, in many respects, a deviant work but one firmly rooted in European intellectual orthodoxy.

Thus is Hitler made to represent the views of, among others, W. H. Auden, Roland Barthes, Baudelaire, Elias Canetti, T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, Freud, George Gissing, Graham Greene, Thomas Hardy, Aldous Huxley, Ibsen, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, F. R. Leavis, George Orwell, Ezra Pound, J. B. Priestley, Stevie Smith, George Steiner, Evelyn Waugh, H. G. Wells, Virginia Woolf, William Butler Yeats, and the Frankfurt School.

It is not Professor Carey's mission in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* to add anything new to our understanding of the anti-democratic ideas to be found in the work of many modern writers. This is a large and important subject that has been closely examined by better minds than Professor Carey, and to our comprehension of it he contributes exactly nothing. On the contrary, because he is incapable of making the most elementary distinctions—between, say, Orwell's analysis of totalitarianism in *Nineteen Eighty-four* and Pound's advocacy of Mussolini's fascism—he confuses every issue he touches upon, and every issue is touched upon only long enough to impute the most evil of motives. Conventional snobberies become, in this account, genocidal impulses, and well-founded fears of declining standards in education and civility are turned into vicious plots against entire populations. The defense of venerable artistic achievements that depend upon scholarly tradition and specialized training for public comprehension is dismissed as status-seeking mystification. Thomas Hardy, of all people, is characterized as "a paradigm of the modern intellectual's effort to limit and dominate the mass" for voicing his dismay over the behavior of the public at the British Museum. This is the offending passage that Professor Carey cites:

> They pass with flippant comments the illuminated manuscripts—the labour of years—and stand under Ramases the Great, joking. Democratic government may be justice to man, but it will probably merge in proletarian, and when these people are our masters, it will lead to more of this contempt, and possibly be the utter ruin of art and literature.

About this prophetic observation, written long before our art museums turned themselves into shopping centers and places of entertainment, Professor Carey writes: "The essential function of these images is to deprive the mass of human status." Just like Hitler, you see. And if Hardy is one of the villains in this bizarre reading of modern history, Andy Warhol is one of the heroes. For it was Warhol, according to the Merton Professor of English at Oxford, who rescued "tinned food" from the anathemas of the intellectuals fussing over "the sacredness of individuality." Warhol's use of "a mass icon" in his Campbell's Soup pictures is thus elevated to a historic act of resistance against the malign attempts of the intellectuals "to acquire the control over the mass."

What is really going on here? For Professor Carey, "Spatial metaphors of 'high' and 'low' culture are logically meaningless," and "all systems of cultural hierarchy" are to be

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firmly rejected in the name of true democracy. It is one of the curiosities of *The Intellectuals and the Masses* that while it contains, by implication, a vehement defense of mass culture against what are regarded as the empty pretensions of high culture, the actualities of mass culture are never closely examined. Except for the brief passage about television already quoted from the "Postscript" to the book, no attempt is ever made to look at the stuff. Popular culture in every form is nonetheless cited as an unqualified benefaction while high culture—and every attempt to distinguish its special qualities—is castigated as an evil influence. So-called "human interest" stories in mass-circulation newspapers are said to provide "for the masses essentially the same aesthetic pleasure that literature gave to the more sophisticated." It thus logically follows, for Professor Carey, that all criticism or ridicule of the press to be found in the writings of T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and Evelyn Waugh, among others, is a plot against the pleasures of the masses. In this account of intellectual malignity, *Scoop* and *Vile Bodies* are evil documents, and so is Leavis's journal *Scrutiny*, if only because it "made no bid for the popular market." It has to be said for Professor Carey that he is remarkably unafraid of appearing to be ridiculous.

What isn't ridiculous, however, is the animus against high culture and intellectual distinction that is displayed on every page of *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, an animus that finally descends into sheer intellectual demagoguery. Exactly why Professor Carey should feel the need to pursue this populist campaign against high culture when the popular culture whose virtues he extols (always in the abstract, to be sure) is already in control of so much of our cultural life, is never made clear in the book itself. You might think, from the demagogic rhetoric of these lectures, that the popular culture of "the masses" is in some sort of danger of being overthrown or even reformed by the champions of high culture when, in fact, precisely the opposite is the situation that currently prevails in the life of the Western democracies today.

The truth seems to be that the triumph of popular culture in the marketplace isn't enough for Professor Carey. He wants us to confer an intellectual prestige and an artistic status upon the products of popular culture of a kind that will give them priority over the despised achievements of high culture. We are, of course, already familiar with this line of argument from the writings of many American academics—and indeed, in the policies now pursued by many of our own institutions of high culture. Yet in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* no argument is ever made for this position. Professor Carey doesn't seem to know enough about the particularities of popular culture to frame a real argument on its behalf. In lieu of an argument there is only an emotion and a prejudice designed to cast a pall over an entire cultural tradition. This makes one wonder, by the way, what precisely is nowadays taught at Oxford under the rubric of English literature, with Professor Carey installed there as the Merton Professor of English and Terry Eagleton functioning as the Warton Professor of English. Alas, it is not only in American academic life that the study of literature is an endangered discipline.

Foremost among the tenets of this prejudice against high culture is, of course, a hatred of modernism. That this hatred of modernism was one of the foundations of Hitler's cultural philosophy is nowhere acknowledged in *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. Neither is the role played by kitsch in the Nazi social program—and indeed, in the social programs of every totalitarian regime. What condemns modernism for Professor Carey is what he calls its "anti-popular" character.

> The intellectuals could not, of course, actually prevent the masses from attaining literacy [he writes]. But they could prevent them reading literature by making it too difficult for them to understand—and this is what they did. The early twentieth century saw a deter-

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> mined effort, on the part of the European intelligentsia, to exclude the masses from culture. . . . Realism of the sort that it was assumed the masses appreciated was abandoned. So was logical coherence. Irrationality and obscurity were cultivated. "Poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult," decreed T. S. Eliot. How deliberate this process of alienating the mass audience was is, of course, problematic and no doubt differed from case to case. But the placing of art beyond the reach of the mass was certainly deliberate at times.

And so on in a rehearsal of every utterance ever made against the allegedly hermetic character of modernist art and literature.

What happens, however, when this tradition of "anti-popular" modernism acquires something akin to a mass following is never examined. If Professor Carey is aware of the enormous public response that can now be counted upon at every major exhibition of Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse, he isn't saying. If it has come to his attention that for a variety of cultural and political reasons every book written by Virginia Woolf—another of his villains—is now in print while only a few titles by Arnold Bennett—identified as "the hero of this book"—enjoy the same status, he doesn't wish to acknowledge the fact. He has no grasp of the real dynamics that govern the interplay of modernist culture and mainstream cultural life in modern societies. He is simply out to destroy the prestige of the high culture that he believes to be inimical to democracy. That is the importance of this dreadful book: its animus, not its intelligence, which is negligible. It is an animus that suggests that the struggle to defend the achievements of high culture against its enemies in high places—places like Oxford University—is entering a new phase.

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Going no place with Peter Blake

by Roger Kimball

There are few ways in which a man can be more innocently employed than in getting money.
—Samuel Johnson

We were starry-eyed, and beautifully naïve.
—Peter Blake

The sound that you hear when reading *No Place Like Utopia*, Peter Blake's memoir of his career as an architect and architectural journalist,[1] is a horn—his own horn. It blows softly and intermittently at first; along the way there are even a few delicious silences in which one overhears some highly amusing conversations. But by the end of the book, the sharp, brassy wailing of his solo performance punctuates nearly every page. This is a pity. For despite a tendency to repetition, Mr. Blake writes well and has some engaging stories to tell. It is, perhaps, an illustration of Tolstoy's observation about families applied to books: happy ones are all alike; those that are unhappy are unhappy each in its own way. *No Place Like Utopia* is unhappy in its own way.

Some background: Peter Blake was born in Berlin in 1920, an exciting though distinctly parlous time in that part of Europe. In 1933, Hitler came to power. The Blakes were harassed and then—fortunate family!—they were expelled from the country with only the clothes on their backs and ten marks apiece. It was the usual story: Blake *père*, a successful corporate lawyer and highly decorated soldier in the Great War, was also, unforgivably, of Jewish descent. The uprooted family went to England, where young Peter attended a Quaker school at York. "We were," Mr. Blake recalls, "assumed to be pacifists; . . . we were assumed to be leftish in our political views—Labour, at the very least." Mr. Blake did not, then or subsequently, do much to challenge such assumptions. Indeed, among other things, *No Place Like Utopia* illustrates the importance of early experiences on the formation of character and opinions. Mr. Blake speaks of his school's "atmosphere of socialist euphoria." It is an aroma that permeates his book.

In due course, Peter's father journeyed up to York for a serious talk with his son: what sort of career did he have in mind? His first answer—a writer—was completely unacceptable: "Writers, to him, were people roughly on a level with pimps, communists and other deadbeats." The second answer—an architect—met with greater approval. In the event, Mr. Blake became both, architect and writer. He does not say whether his father was pleased.

Upon graduating from school in 1938, Mr. Blake went to London, where—partly through intervention of his father's friend Walter Gropius, who was then teaching at Harvard—he got work as a factotum in the office of the architect Serge Chermayeff. A

1 *No Place Like Utopia: Modern Architecture and the Company We Kept*, by Peter Blake; Knopf, 347 pages, $27.50.

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refugee from tsarist Russia, Chermayeff was modernist in aesthetics, impeccably snobbish in dress and manners, radical or at least radical chic in politics. It was a combination that appealed greatly to Mr. Blake, then and later. Working for Chermayeff, even as a glorified office boy, brought him into contact with a large circle of British avant-garde artists and critics—Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Nikolaus Pevsner, among others. This was the first but by no means the last time that Mr. Blake demonstrated his great knack for being in the right place at the right time. As one reads through *No Place Like Utopia* and registers the career opportunities and famous personages that present themselves to Mr. Blake like one plum after the next, one is tempted to conclude that this knack was his greatest gift.

When war broke out, Mr. Blake, notwithstanding the pacifist inclinations inculcated by his Quaker school, attempted to enlist in the British army. He discovered that his German background interfered with those feelings of trust that make serving in the armed forces rewarding. The rest of his family having moved to New York, he decided to join them there. Letters of introduction from Serge Chermayeff opened various doors. At first, Mr. Blake worked free-lance for *Architectural Forum*—a subsidiary of Time Inc. that he would later serve as editor—and then, in the fall of 1940, he enlisted in the school of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. Being thoroughly steeped in the modernist ethos of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, Mr. Blake bridled at the Beaux-Arts orientation of the school. He found some outlet in his part-time work at the Philadelphia firm of Stonorov & Kahn, where he met and worked with the great architect Louis Kahn, and in his frequent visits to the philosopher Bertrand Russell, who was then living outside Philadelphia, lecturing at the Barnes Foundation in Merion and emanating his distinctive brand of olympian political correctness.

Toward the end of 1942, Mr. Blake obtained work as a junior writer for *Architectural Forum*. Among his first assignments was to review Frank Lloyd Wright's *Autobiography*, a 560-page monument to the architect's egomania and questionable political views. In the first edition of the book (the autobiography went through many versions), Wright was patently anti-Semitic, uncomfortably pro-German, and embarassingly smitten with Uncle Joe Stalin: "if Comrade Stalin . . . is betraying the revolution," Wright purred, "I say he is betraying it into the hands of the Russian people." Mr. Blake wrote a review that, as he says, "put this little bigot in his place." He left his copy on the editor's desk and went out for lunch—just in time for Wright to stroll into the office and (as was his wont) snoop around. Of course, he discovered the review and flew into a rage. Mr. Blake's little effort was quietly forgotten and another, rather more laudatory, notice of Wright's book was published.

Meanwhile, the war continued. The American army was apparently less suspicious than was the British army about Mr. Blake's pedigree, and in due course a draft notice arrived and he enlisted. For some months, Mr. Blake was stationed at 1 Park Avenue in New York, where he was deputed to help produce training manuals for aerial gunners. As he notes, New York in the mid-1940s "was probably the best place in the world for anyone interested in the arts: many of the leading artists and architects had fled Paris when the Germans moved in, and had settled in Manhattan." Pierre Chareau, Le Corbusier, Yves Tanguy, André Breton, Piet Mondrian, Fernand Léger, Alexander Calder, Arshile Gorky, among many others, congregated in or around New York. Mr. Blake, with his unerring instinct for the chic, encountered them all. (Some of these expatriates, he notes, learned English quite well; others limped along with a few phrases. The only two words in "English" that he ever heard Fernand Léger utter were "Glasse birre!")

Eventually, Mr. Blake tired of his sedate

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desk job and applied for a transfer. After some additional training, he was assigned to a military intelligence unit and was posted to Europe. Mr. Blake's adventures include being in the very first group of Americans to enter Berlin after the city had been pulverized into submission. His observation of the brutal behavior of the Red Army, then and in subsequent months, was not edifying, and he said so in letters home to friends and business associates. His criticisms had consequences. In 1947, he was demobbed and returned to New York, looking for work. He went first to *Architectural Forum*. Howard Myers, the editor and publisher, wanted to rehire him. But having shared some of Mr. Blake's letters with members of his editorial staff, he discovered that his friend's criticism of Stalin and the Red Army did not go down at all well. "[T]hey told me," Myers explained with apparent incredulity, "that it would be 'disruptive' of staff morale if you came back, in light of your political views." What Myers did not fully appreciate was the fact that the Newspaper Guild in New York at that time was, in Mr. Blake's bald but accurate formulation, "under full control of the Communist Party members and their fellow travelers." It was worse luck that the chapter at Time Inc. "was notorious for its rigid adherence to the party line."

This is something that even today liberals waffle about—when, indeed, they do not decry it outright as an example of "McCarthyite paranoia." Mr. Blake is himself a political liberal; on most issues he is as wet and squishy as they come; but when it comes to the Stalinist infiltration of the American media in the 1930s and 1940s, he is unburdened by any illusions. It is worth quoting his summary of the situation at some length.

> In retrospect, it may seem that we overestimated the intelligence and influence of the Stalinists, and that we turned slightly paranoid in our concerns. I don't really think so. It should be remembered that it was not uncommon in the 1930s and 1940s for Stalin's enemies outside the USSR to be assassinated by GPU agents, or kidnapped, or smeared and otherwise ruined personally and professionally. It was not uncommon for people who opposed the Stalinist line to be blackballed for jobs in literature and the arts, for academic appointments, and for similarly innocent pursuits. Conversely, it was very common for Stalinists and their fellow travelers to be appointed, routinely, to jobs in the media, ranging from the most mundane to the most exalted. We were quite aware of this, and some of my friends had become aware of it through bitter personal experience; and the horror stories reported to us by ex-Communists were entirely credible.
>
> Today, it is hard to believe that agents of the Comintern would be asinine enough to try to infiltrate and dominate a student publication on architecture and planning—and the whole thing is of course more than a little ridiculous. But it really did happen—and it happened on every level, and in virtually every field even remotely related to policy-making or to the shaping of public opinion. Some of my friends of those early 1940s—specifically the Fletchers, the McMillens, the Harknesses, and other liberal or left-liberal architects who would later join Walter Gropius to form The Architects Collaborative (TAC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts—these lovely, idealistic, innocent people couldn't believe what hit them: neither they nor I could honestly believe that Stalinists and their fellow travelers would waste their time trying to undermine the Harvard Graduate School of Design, of all places, for God's sake!

As it happened, Mr. Blake was luckier than most journalists who were suspected of ideological impurity. Howard Myers did not dare hire him outright for the staff of *Architectural Forum*, but he did commission him to travel around the country with his wife to conduct a survey of important American cities. For an architect and architectural journalist, it was a marvelous opportunity. His first stop was Chicago, the city of Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan, D. H. Burnham and John Wellborn Root. For

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anyone interested in the birth of modern architecture, it is a goldmine. And by the time Mr. Blake made his visit, it was also the home of Mies van der Rohe, who had been brought from Germany in the late Thirties to head the Armour Institute. The young representative of *Architectural Forum* was promptly introduced to Mies and they hit it off so well—partly, Mr. Blake speculates, because he was able to speak to Mies in German—that what was meant to be an hour-long interview turned into a voluble all-night marathon. Mr. Blake and his wife did not leave until 3:00 A.M.

Mr. Blake's travels took him also to Boston, Detroit, St. Louis, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Houston. He met Gropius, Minoru Yamasaki, Eero Saarinen, Charles and Ray Eames, and others. Returning to New York in 1948, he went to a party in Easthampton where he met Philip Johnson. Then about forty years old and the unofficial head of the department of architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, Johnson had long since abandoned his efforts to found an American fascist party and had thrown himself into the study and practice of architecture. At the time, he was an avid proponent of modernism and disciple of Mies: he had not yet graduated to the postmodern frivolity that made him famous in the 1970s and 1980s. He was, however, already determinedly impish. After that single meeting, Johnson invited the eager young Mr. Blake to participate in a symposium at MOMA on the question of what was happening to modern architecture. Other participants included such luminaries as Johnson himself, Lewis Mumford, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, and Alfred Barr. Mr. Blake summarizes his brief contribution; it doesn't sound particularly impressive. But he must have impressed Philip Johnson, for a few days after this event Johnson invited him to come to MOMA as curator in the department of architecture and industrial design. (While Johnson was really in charge of the department, his position remained unofficial because—as he himself put it—"some of the trustees can't forget my Nazi past.")

Mr. Blake's appointment at MOMA marked the real beginning of his career as an impresario for modern architecture. He remained there until 1950, when he went to *Architectural Forum* for more than twice the salary he was getting at MOMA. He became editor-in-chief in 1964, a position he held until the magazine folded in 1972. Resurrecting the name of an occasional supplement to *Architectural Forum*, he then started a short-lived successor called *Architecture Plus*, which ran until 1975. Along the way, Mr. Blake also found time to design a number of buildings: several houses in the Hamptons, a rehabilitation center in Binghamton, New York, etc. The reader will find black-and-white photographs of several of Mr. Blake's buildings in *No Place Like Utopia*, along with captions explaining how innovative and well-sited they are.

Mr. Blake's positions at MOMA and *Architectural Forum* naturally brought him into contact with nearly every important architect and designer in the developed world. The list of people he got to know is a kind of designer's Who's Who of the period. Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Le Corbusier, Eero Saarinen, Charles Eames, Hans Knoll, Buckminster Fuller, Serge Chermayeff, Alvar Aalto, and on and on: Mr. Blake knew them all and became friendly with many. Nor was his circle confined to architects and designers. He also got to know many artists. He was particularly friendly with Jackson Pollock and his wife, Lee Krasner. Mr. Blake was with them, for example, on the fateful Thanksgiving in 1950 when Pollock, having stayed sober for nearly two years, fell spectacularly off the wagon, became raging drunk, and deposited Thanksgiving dinner and the table on which it had rested halfway across the room. It was the beginning of the downward spiral that would end with Pollock's killing himself and one of his passengers in a drunken car crash six years later.

Among the most charming bits of *No Place Like Utopia* are the anecdotes. For example, Mr. Blake recalls that when Philip

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Goodwin and Edward Durrell Stone's lackluster new building for the Museum of Modern Art at 11 West Fifty-third Street was finished in 1938, Monroe Wheeler—the director of publications, whom Mr. Blake describes as "a charming and civilized snob"—commissioned new stationery. It was duly designed, approved, and printed: thousands of sheets of letterhead, envelopes, cards, etc. The only problem was the address: the stationery read 11 *East* Fifty-third Street. As Mr. Blake explains, "neither Monroe nor anyone else in the upper echelons of MOMA had ever known anyone with a West Side address, and so this little mistake slipped by undetected. When I joined the staff some ten years later, people in the various curatorial departments were still using notepads made up of scrap from recycled East 53rd Street letterheads. . . ."

Mr. Blake also provides several good thumbnail character appreciations in his book. There is, for example, an affectionate portrait of Marcel Breuer, the Hungarian-born modernist architect and furniture designer who greatly influenced a generation of architects through his inspired teaching at Harvard. Mr. Blake does indulge in a few questionable judgments: Louis Kahn's great Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, e.g., is dismissed as a "splendid design for a railroad station." Few people who have seen exhibitions at the Kimbell will agree. But he also generously commends some forgotten or underrated architects, rightly noting, for example, that Paul Rudolph—an important architect whose stock suffered grievously from the rise of postmodernism—is a person of "absolutely staggering and incorruptible talent." And it must be said, too, that Mr. Blake can see beyond his personal dislikes. He clearly did not care for Frank Lloyd Wright. But he acknowledges that, despite everything, Wright possessed "a talent simply unequaled in this century, and in much of the architecture of the past."

In all this, Mr. Blake is amusing and sometimes instructive. He is also clear-eyed about the essential fraudulence of postmodernism and "deconstructivism." He describes one of Robert Venturi's buildings as "a work of almost mind-boggling mediocrity with deliberate touches of schlock": it is an indictment that can be applied to virtually all of Venturi's work and, indeed, to postmodernism generally. The problems with *No Place Like Utopia* are of two sorts. There is the problem of what we might call tone. And there is the problem of politics. Curiously, they are often intertwined. In his acknowledgments, Mr. Blake laments that a friend who had been reading through and helping to edit his manuscript died before reading the book's final chapters. Readers of *No Place Like Utopia* have reason to lament her death as well. For she might have restrained a bit of Mr. Blake's unseemly boasting. To be sure, *Architectural Forum* was a respectable architecture magazine. It benefited especially from the design genius of Paul Grotz, the magazine's head graphic designer for many years. But it is less clear that *Architectural Forum* "established a new standard of journalism" in the field of architectural criticism, as Mr. Blake claims. And the idea that it was the *only* American magazine worth reading about architecture, as Mr. Blake insists ("the only architectural magazine in the U.S. that produced serious and searching criticism in those years"), is ridiculous. *The Architectural Record*, for example, published virtually all of the important architects that *Architectural Forum* ever published, and it contained just as much respectable criticism. Mr. Blake boasts repeatedly that as editor he deliberately thumbed his nose at advertisers; he edited the magazine, he said, not for advertisers or even for most architects but for "perhaps a hundred of our brightest and most critical readers." He suggests that this was a laudable token of his bravery and independence. Perhaps it was. But it is worth noting that *Architectural Forum* no longer exists, a fact that may lead some to reflect on the important difference between critical independence and irresponsible folly.

The tooting of Mr. Blake's personal trumpet is not confined to his nostalgia for *Architectural Forum* under his direction. He also

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ladles praise on his own accomplishments as an architect. When he builds a modern house in the Hamptons, it is respectful of the natural surroundings and generally a contribution to civic life of the entire community. When someone else builds a modern house out there, it is an example of overdevelopment and nouveau-riche posturing.

The real problem with *No Place Like Utopia*, however—the thing that ultimately derails it as a serious book about the architecture of the period—is Mr. Blake's extraordinarily naïve stance as an anti-capitalist crusader and his embrace of utopian socialist politics. It is, of course, well known that, in the 1920s and later, many modernist architects flirted with various utopian schemes. But Mr. Blake takes this one element of modernism and elevates it to pride of place. Again and again he insists that the modern movement in architecture was "a political movement, not a 'style' . . . It was politically left, anticapitalist, and dogmatically so. . . . It was commitment to change the world, nothing less." Today, alas, "any connection that may have once existed between modern architecture and a commitment to humanity seem[s] to have evaporated." Things were best before 1950—when, of course, Mr. Blake himself was young. Then architects weren't the mercenary beasts they have since become. According to him, "there were very few good modern architects, in those days, who seemed to think very much about making money." Now, amazingly, architects want to be paid for their work.

Nor are Mr. Blake's political animadversions confined to architecture and planning. In the course of the book, readers are treated to the entire menu of standard-issue left-wing political clichés. Richard Nixon comes in for a good deal of criticism, as of course does Ronald Reagan, whom he describes as "a famous American paranoid" who mistakenly called the Soviet Union an Evil Empire. Frequently, Mr. Blake is just plain silly. "[F]ree enterprise would never build truly humane and civilized communities," he tells us. But what economic system does better? Take a look at the record of socialism on this score. There is a reason that societies the world over have embraced capitalism: it is their ticket to a higher standard of living. Nor is Mr. Blake terribly careful about his facts. In one place, he writes that after 1970 "less and less subsidized housing was being built for the poor and those with lower incomes; less and less money was spent to create healthier and happier urban environments, or better schools and universities, or better health facilities." But a look at government expenditures shows that spending has gone up in every one of these categories. For example, the United States spends far more on education per pupil than any other country in the world. Perhaps that is part of the problem: too much government money and not enough private initiative and responsibility.

Mr. Blake consistently uses "elitism" as a term of abuse. ("Market-driven" is another favorite epithet.) Accordingly, we are told that neoclassical architecture "spoke the language of elitism and totalitarianism," as if they were the same thing or even similar. But what about Mr. Blake's favorite architects? He several times singles out Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion for special praise. Does he think that Mies intended that jewel for the proletariat? In the end, Mr. Blake's "politics" is a muddle. Indeed, his oft-repeated denigration of "style" in favor of political activism is itself essentially a gesture, a matter of style: it is the fashionable, elite style, part of whose elitism consists in spouting socialist nostrums while enjoying all the benefits of capitalist largess. Mr. Blake's title suggests that he realizes that the word "utopia" means "no place." But his sentimental embrace of utopian attacks on capitalism and free-enterprise makes one wonder. His "idealism" really is "starry-eyed" and "naïve." It is part of his naïveté to believe that such qualities are in any way laudable or "beautiful." As Jack Worthing in *The Importance of Being Earnest* might have put it, there really is no place like utopia, not even of any kind.

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C. P. Cavafy, a poet in history

by Joseph Epstein

Freaks of literature, like freaks of nature, turn up in odd and unpredictable places. Why, after all, should Buenos Aires produce a Borges, Palmero a Lampedusa, Trieste a Svevo? The only—and perfectly unsatisfactory—answer is, Why not! Nothing in the traditions out of which any of these writers derive could have anticipated their becoming, as all did, writers of world interest. No very good explanation is available, really, just the brute fact of their arrival, writing quite unlike anyone else before them and producing enduring work of universal value. As they come upon the scene out of nowhere, neither do these writers begin or leave anything like a tradition behind them. *Sui generis*, in a class by oneself, is, after all, only another phrase for freakish.

C. P. Cavafy, the Greek poet who lived in the ancient Egyptian city of Alexandria, is another such freak of literature—perhaps the most interesting, idiosyncratic, and unexplainable of them all. Along with Borges, Lampedusa, and Svevo, Cavafy is a poet whose life, whose subject matter, whose point of view is inextricably bound up with his city. "Outside his poems," the Greek poet and critic George Seferis has said, "Cavafy does not exist." But without Alexandria, neither would the poems exist: "for me," Cavafy wrote, referring to Alexandria in "In the Same Place," one of his late poems, "the whole of you is transformed into feeling."

Even though he wrote his poems in Greek, there is a sense in which Cavafy was more an Alexandrian than a Greek. Proud though he was of his Greek heritage, he did not in fact care to be described as a Greek, much preferring to be thought a Hellene. Alexandria, that city built by Alexander the Great and ruled by the Ptolemies, the site of Cleopatra's grandeur and Mark Antony's destruction, was for centuries the vessel through which so much world history flowed. This, the historical Alexandria, a city always more Mediterranean than Egyptian, was the Alexandria that Cavafy loved. He himself came, through his poetry, to resemble it in being yet another vessel through which history, this time in the form of his extraordinary poetry, flowed.

When Cavafy—whose dates are 1863–1933—lived in Alexandria, it was much less a classical than a preponderantly commercial city. Judeo-Hellenic and Franco-Levantine, it was, in the richly crowded sentence of Patrick Leigh Fermor, "a cosmopolitan, decadent, and marvellous hybrid, old in sin, steeped in history, warrened with intrigue, stuffed with cotton, flashing with cash, strident with cries for baksheesh, restless with conjuring tricks, and, after sunset, murmurous with improper and complicated suggestions." In his day, Cavafy must have made a few improper and complicated suggestions of his own.

Constantine Cavafy was the youngest of nine children born to a family that, by the time he came into the world, had already

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seen somewhat better and soon would see much worse days. In partnership with his brother, Cavafy's father was one of the leading merchants in the Greek colony in Alexandria; the family firm specialized in cotton and textiles. In this colony, all that counted was wealth, which the Cavafys had in sufficient quantity for the young Constantine to be raised with a French tutor and an English nurse in the house. Constantine's older brothers were sent abroad for their education. Their father, a free spender, died when Cavafy was seven, leaving his wife with very little money and his son with scant memories of him and the mixed blessing of continuing to think himself a rich man's son. Although the family retained something of its old social standing in Alexandria, having been thought upper-class, its position without wealth would henceforth be insecure, living with only the furniture and the memories of former luxuriance. Later Cavafy would tell E. M. Forster that aristocracy in modern Greece was the sheerest pretense, being built exclusively on cash: "To be an aristocrat there is to have made a corner in coffee in the Piraeus in 1849."

Cavafy's mother was now dependent on her sons for survival. At one point, when Cavafy was nine, the family moved to Liverpool, where the family business had a branch. Later the family moved to London, then back to Liverpool, only returning to Alexandria in 1877, when Cavafy was fourteen. In 1882, during the riots of Egyptians against Europeans in Alexandria, the family fled to Constantinople, where it remained for three years. The result was that between the ages of nine and fourteen, Cavafy lived in England, and between nineteen and twenty-two he lived in Turkey. Afterward he returned to Alexandria, where he remained, with infrequent visits to Greece, what might be called a firmly rooted cosmopolitan.

Cavafy, lucky fellow, did not leave many letters behind, nor an extensive diary. He wrote very little prose in his life and easily forbore the literary man's temptation of autobiography. Little is known about some of the most basic facts of his youth: where, for example, he went to school, apart from a year spent in a commercial school for Greek children in Alexandria. I say "lucky fellow," for the paucity of biographical information about Cavafy has spared him the cruelty of biographers poking into his life and career chiefly to find ways of advancing their own. The hurdle of intrusive biography is the last that any writer has to jump, and any decent-minded reader nowadays has to hope that the writers he admires will find a way to cheat their biographers. In good part, Constantine Cavafy seems to have done so.

The most complete biography of Cavafy in English is a slender (by contemporary standards) volume of 222 pages by the English writer Robert Liddell.[1] It is mainly concerned with putting to rout a good number of falsifications about Cavafy concocted by Greek writers of Freudian or Marxistical bent. An honest writer, Mr. Liddell has composed a book that, in the nature of the case, is full of "seems" and "supposes." Thus: "Cavafy seems never to have had confidants, and unfortunately we do not know whether his emotions were in any way involved in his sexual life." And: "There is no reason to suppose that he was an obsessional homosexual, the slave of his appetites." Mr. Liddell supplies those facts about Cavafy that can be nailed down, and the scarcity of these facts sets one's own imagination to work and turns inquiring minds—as *The National Enquirer* calls them—to the work itself, from which one is left to do one's best to extrapolate the life.

What is known about Cavafy as a young man is that, upon his return to Alexandria, he had, as Mr. Liddell reports, two things to hide from his friends: "homosexuality and acute poverty." He did what he could to alleviate the latter by working briefly as a journalist, then as a broker at the city's Cotton Exchange. (He supplemented his income by dabbling in the market throughout his life.) He began to work in 1889 as an unpaid clerk at the city's Irrigation Office, in

1 *Cavafy: A Critical Biography*, by Robert Liddell; Duckworth (London), 1974.

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the hope of catching on as a salaried employee, which, after showing his usefulness in dealing with documents in foreign languages, he did about three years later. He remained at the Dantesque-sounding location of the Third Circle of the Irrigation Office until his retirement thirty years later. Robert Liddell speculates that his job at the Irrigation Office gave him the kind of freedom he required.

This was the freedom to be Cavafy, which was a leisurely yet full-time job. E. M. Forster, who was in Alexandria during World War I and who was an early admirer and promoter of Cavafy's poetry, described Cavafy as a fixture in the city: "a Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe." Forster was here describing the poet going either from his home to his office or from his office to his home, perhaps stopping to deliver himself of a sentence of extraordinary syntactical complexity and impressive precision. Cavafy's home was an apartment in the old Greek quarter on the Rue Lepsius, where he lived after the death of his mother, with whom he had resided until he was thirty-six; on a lower floor was a brothel, not the sole such institution on the street, which was also known as the Rue Clapsius. A hospital and a church were nearby. Cavafy more than once told visitors: "Where could I live better? Below, the brothel caters to the flesh. And there is the church which forgives sin. And there is the hospital where we die."

Cavafy's was the settled bachelor life of the homosexual *homme de lettres*. In Alexandria, people remember him as never being in a hurry. He wore dark suits with vests and thick glasses behind which his large eyes were draped by heavy, hooded lids. He lived in an apartment crowded with old furniture and rugs from his mother's apartment, but, surprisingly for a man steeped in history, not all that many books, and those mostly devoted to ancient Greek history, which he knew exceedingly well. He was an occasional gambler. He is said generally to have paid for his sex; his taste, Robert Liddell reports, ran not to Egyptian or Arab *ingénes* but to young Greek men. From the ages assigned to the men in his more erotic poems, one gathers that his ideal was that of Greek men in their twenties.

As Cavafy grew older and as his vigor diminished, so did his fear of scandal, and he began writing—and promulgating—poems about the emotions surrounding homosexual love. With age, he grew rather seedy. Owing to the cancer of the larynx that finally killed him, toward the end of his life he walked about with his neck swathed in bandages. He dyed his hair with a solution of his own invention. (Voluptuaries take even less kindly to aging and death than the rest of us, and Cavafy's early poems show him when still at a young age already imagining himself a dessicated old man.) His conversation was measured, affable, and apparently memorable, judging by the number of people who met him who have recalled various of his utterances. All must have sensed that, in this odd duck Cavafy, they were in the presence of a great man. Right they were, too.

Cavafy would supply a fine if anomolous chapter in a book on the history of literary reputation. He was, at least among the cognescenti, a famous poet who in his lifetime never published a book, or at least never offered one for publication. Early in his career he published only a half dozen of the nearly two hundred poems he had already written, many of which he would later repudiate. (The final Cavafy canon, in Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard's excellent translation, consists of 175 poems.[2]) Cavafy later brought together a pamphlet of his own devising consisting of only twenty-one poems, which he gave to relatives and a few friends. "Thereafter," writes Professor Keeley, who is Cavafy's best critic, "his method of disseminating his work, along with periodical

2 *C. P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*, revised edition (1992). Translated from the Greek by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard; edited by George Savidis. Princeton University Press, 284 pages, $39.50; $12.95 paper.

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publication, was through increasingly heavy folders containing broadsheets and offprints, the folders kept up-to-date year after year by Cavafy himself and distributed by his own hand to his select audience of readers, sometimes with revisions inserted by pen." When Cavafy died at seventy, there was no collected edition of his poems, nor had he left instructions for one.

Edith Wharton once claimed that she was fortunate when young not to have been considered promising: all sorts of pressures were removed. Cavafy took this a step further and claimed that he was fortunate to have been neglected. For one thing, a writer in a society where there are no obvious institutions of recognition for artists is automatically released from currying favor; nor need he worry about expressing things that might be impolitic from the standpoint of advancing his career. For another, in such a society a writer may develop at his own pace; he is unlikely to feel, as he might in a different setting, that if he hasn't won this prize by that age, or published that much by this age, he is a dismal failure. A neglected poet, in other words, has time to develop.

Cavafy required such time. The watershed year in his career, all his critics recognize, and as he himself would avow, was 1911, when he was forty-eight years old. (By forty-eight, a poet in America should already have had five books of poems published, an NEA and perhaps a Guggenheim grant behind him, be awaiting a MacArthur, and have tenure locked in. By fifty, if on schedule, he already begins to write much worse.) Not only did Cavafy produce a number of his best poems in the year 1911—including "The God Abandons Antony," "The Glory of the Ptolemies," and "Ithaka"—but, as if by magic, he had found his style: plain, spare, dramatic.

Cavafy found his subject in the Greek world of the Eastern Mediterranean. Many of the best of his poems are set in the two hundred years following the conquests of Alexander the Great. "The great age of Hellas," as C. M. Bowra wrote, "was no subject for his subtle taste." Bowra is surely correct when he adds that Cavafy "was interested not in the great lessons of history but in its smaller episodes, in which he saw more human interest than in the triumphs of heroes." Cavafy had a splendid instinct for capturing the perfect historical detail that demonstrated the continuity of human nature. Often, the deeper Cavafy's poetry takes a reader into history the more the poem makes him think of the present. His famous poem "Waiting for the Barbarians," in which the rulers and citizens of an unnamed ancient city, awaiting at the city walls, are disappointed at the failure of the barbarians to arrive, ends with the lines:

> Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?
> (How serious people's faces have become.)
> Why are the streets and squares emptying
> so rapidly,
> everyone going home so lost in thought?
>
> Because night has fallen and the barbarians
> have not come.
> And some who have just returned from the
> border say
> there are no barbarians any longer.
>
> And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
> They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Today it is difficult to read that poem without thinking of the West *vis-à-vis* the crumbling of Communism. Great poets write poems applicable to events and situations that they themselves could not ever have foreseen. Cavafy's achievement was somehow to write outside time by anchoring his writing as firmly as possible inside time.

Style helped Cavafy immensely in this endeavor. Once he hit his stride as a poet, Cavafy's poems became more and more shorn of ornament. He scarcely ever wrote about nature, and never, *à la* Lawrence Durrell (another of Cavafy's admirers), indulged in Middle Eastern exotica. He wrote in modern Greek, of course, but at least one of

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Cavafy's critics has suggested that he "thought" his poems in English. (After his early years in England, his Greek was spoken with a slight English accent, and his English, though fluent, was said not to be free of small mistakes—or not always, as an immigrant woman I knew once said, "impeachable.") Reading Cavafy in translation, one doesn't feel—despite Robert Frost's remark about poetry being what is lost in translation—too keen a loss. W. H. Auden has written on this point:

> What, then, is it in Cavafy's poems that survives translation and excites? Something I can only call, most inadequately, a tone of voice, a personal speech. I have read translations of Cavafy made by many different hands, but every one of them was immediately recognizable as a poem by Cavafy; nobody else could possibly have written it.

In their foreword to the *Collected Poems*, Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard speak of attending to Cavafy's "formal concerns, for example his subtle use of enjambment and his mode of establishing rhythm and emphasis through repetition." But in their limpid translation, Cavafy's poems read with the clarity and ease of a kind that seems trans-national and outside time. Howard Moss said of Cavafy's historical poems that "the tone [is] contemporary, but the voice timeless." Few of Cavafy's poems are more than two pages long; most are much shorter than that. "Nero's Deadline," if not one of his best, is a characteristic Cavafy poem:

> Nero wasn't worried at all when he heard
> the utterance of the Delphic Oracle:
> "Beware the age of seventy-three."
> Plenty of time to enjoy himself still.
> He's thirty. The deadline
> the god has given him is quite enough
> to cope with future dangers.
>
> Now, a little tired, he'll return to Rome—
> but wonderfully tired from that journey
> devoted entirely to pleasure:
> theatres, garden-parties, stadiums . . .
> evenings in the cities of Achaia . . .
> and, above all, the sensual delight of naked
> bodies . . .
>
> So much for Nero. And in Spain Galba
> secretly musters and drills his army—
> Galba, the old man in his seventy-third year.

This poem demonstrates Cavafy's stripped-down method, what Joseph Brodsky has called "the economy of maturity": no imagery, no metrical tricks, no rhyme, no surprising or even striking adjectives, nothing ornate; a flat account of an event is given—sometimes told by a participant in the drama of a poem, sometimes (as here) by an offstage narrator—sometimes but not always with an ironic twist added at the end. "Cavafy," wrote George Seferis, "stands at the boundary where poetry strips herself in order to become prose."

But wherein, one might ask, lies the poetry? Often it is in the drama of Cavafy's poems, but not invariably even in that. Strangely, uniquely, I believe, it lies in the absence of metaphors in Cavafy's poems. Cavafy's poems are free from metaphors for the good reason that each of his poems is a metaphor unto itself. In Eliot, in James Joyce, in Yeats, one must, in effect, decode or parse or unpack symbols and myths to extract meaning. The very content of Cavafy's poems requires no such decoding or parsing or unpacking, to learn that this equals that, or that parallels the other.

Through his irony, sometimes through his drama, with the aid of his historical precision and his refusal of undue emphasis or over-dramatization, Cavafy can take a small historical incident, or even a person of tertiary significance, and raise it or him to an impressive general significance. Easier said than done, of course. The details have to be got exactly right, the meaning of the event described perfectly understood.

One of the my favorite among Cavafy's poems is "Alexandrian Kings," which is about a ceremony in which Antony declares Cleopatra's children kings of the known world, which is divided up among them.

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Kaisarion, the reputed son of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, is declared the most powerful of them all, King of Kings. Cavafy describes the child Kaisarion's clothes ("dressed in pink silk,/ on his chest a bunch of hyacinths,/ his belt a double row of amethysts and sapphires,/ his shoes tied with white ribbons/ prinked with rose-colored pearls"). He reports that the ceremony was a theatrical success, but makes plain that, in the eyes of the worldly Alexandrians, who enjoyed the event thoroughly on a day when the sky was "a pale blue," it was never more than sheer theater: "they know of course what all this was worth,/ what empty words they really were, these kingships."

Plutarch's account of the event, told in his life of Mark Antony, is rather different. In it, the emphasis is on the two gold thrones Antony has set up for himself and Cleopatra. Plutarch describes the clothes of Antony and Cleopatra's children, Alexander and Ptolemy, but not, as does Cavafy, those of Kaisarion. Plutarch tells us that the Alexandrians were offended by the entire performance: "it seemed a theatrical piece of insolence and contempt of his country." In Cavafy, the Alexandrians are less enraged, more cynical. The entire episode is made all the more poignant by the fact, reported later and laconically by Plutarch, that "so, afterwards, when Cleopatra was dead he [Kaisarion] was killed." The attention, in Cavafy's version, is where it ought to be: on the child, who, being history's plaything, is pure victim.

Is this touching up history? Better perhaps to think it poet's history. Cavafy, toward the end of his life, declared himself "a historical poet." He added: "I could never write a novel or a play; but I hear inside me a hundred and twenty-five voices telling me that I could write history." Living in an ancient city, Cavafy had a feel for history, found his inspirations and deepest perceptions in history. The historian's function, in this view, is to show what happened in history; the poet's is to make plain its significance, but in the particular, oddly angled way of poets. In a later poem entitled "Kaisarion," Cavafy recounts how he came to write "Alexandrian Kings." He recounts killing an hour or two on a book of inscriptions about the Ptolemies, where he happened to come upon Kaisarion's name. The poem continues:

> Because we know
> so little about you from history,
> I could fashion you more freely in my mind.
> I made you good-looking and sensitive.
> My art gives your face
> a dreamy, an appealing beauty.
> And so completely did I imagine you
> that late last night,
> as my lamp went out—I let it go out on
> purpose—
> it seemed you came into my room,
> it seemed you stood there in front of me,
> looking just as you would have
> in conquered Alexandria,
> pale and weary, ideal in your grief,
> still hoping they might take pity on you,
> those scum who whispered: "Too many
> Caesars."

Not all Cavafy's poems have a classical setting. A handful are set in the Byzantine Empire. A few are of the kind that Marguerite Yourcenar, who translated Cavafy into French, calls his "poems of passionate reflection." (Only one in the *Collected Poems* is uncharacteristically comic: "King Claudius," which considers the Hamlet story from the uncle and step-father's point of view.) Many more are erotic, some among them plainly autobiographically erotic. Connoisseurs of Cavafy almost unanimously rate this latter category least interesting of the various categories of his poems. One is inclined to agree with Mme Yourcenar that these poems tend toward the sentimental.

To be sure, Cavafy is a highly erotic poet, but his is an eroticism recollected in tranquility. None of his poems is in the least pornographic; all of them are post-coital, and generally offer a reminiscence of one or another lover now gone. The ancient world was scarcely bereft of hedonism, and art and the erotic were there almost everywhere

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intertwined. So were they in Cavafy's own conception of poetry. In such poems as "Very Seldom" and "Understanding" ("In the loose living of my early years/ the impulses of my poetry were shaped,/ the boundaries of my art were laid down"), he makes unmistakably clear the importance of his homoerotic life to his art. The erotic in Cavafy takes two forms: it is only fleetingly obtainable—and often not even that—and then it evanesces. Art was for him consolation, at moments even compensation, for all that was unobtainable and lost to him in the erotic realm. In a poem with the telling title of "Half an Hour," about a lover whom he would never know, one finds the lines: ". . . But we who serve Art,/ sometimes with the mind's intensity,/ can create—but of course only for a short time—/ pleasure that seems almost physical."

Joseph Brodsky is probably correct when he says that Cavafy's poems, without their "hedonistic bias," would have lapsed into mere anecdotes. Mme Yourcenar, a close student of these matters, felt that Cavafy had gone from the romantic view of homosexuality—"from the idea of an abnormal, morbid experience outside the limits of the usual and the licit"—to the classical view, in which, in her words, "notions of happiness, fulfillment, and the validity of pleasure gain ascendancy." This, too, on the evidence of the poems, seems probably true. Robert Liddell writes that Cavafy's homosexuality "made him what he was" and at the same time warns us that "it can be exaggerated and read into his work where it is not present." Contradictory though it may sound, he is correct on both counts.

Yet the significance of homosexuality in Cavafy's poetry, in my view, cuts deep. I think his homosexuality helped develop his vision of a world in which, first, the gods are fond of playing tricks on mortals: one of his earliest poems refers to men as "toys of fate," and another to "this unfair fate." Second, I think Cavafy's homosexuality intensified his sense that all that is not art is fated to die in this world. Cavafy's is a world that is all past and present and no future. Without religion—and, it is true, Cavafy was born into and died with the rites of the Greek Orthodox Church—without religion, which implies a continuous future, who can escape the grim knowledge that human existence is birth, life and loss, death and oblivion? Homosexuals, having no children, who are the key agency of futurity, get this sad news first. It comes to many of the rest of us rather later. The bone knowledge that everything in life is created to disappear is the beginning of what is known as the tragic sense—and Cavafy had this sense *in excelsis*.

Edmund Keeley makes the point that the tragic sense operates more strongly in Cavafy than does the moral sense. Some commentators have gone further and spoken of Cavafy as amoral. Marguerite Yourcenar speaks of his "absence of moralism," and E. M. Forster even speaks of his "amoral mind." Forster wrote:

> Courage and cowardice are equally interesting to his amoral mind, because he sees in both of them opportunities for sensation. What he envies is the power to snatch sensation, to triumph over the moment even if remorse ensues. Perhaps that physical snatching is courage; it is certainly the seed of exquisite memories and it is possibly the foundation of art. The amours of youth, even when disreputable, are delightful, thinks Cavafy, but the point of them is not that: the point is that they create the future, and may give to an ageing man in a Rue Lepsius perceptions he would never have known.

Cavafy himself seemed to believe that his sensual experiences—however fleeting, however superficial—gave him not only memories on which he could live for long afterwards but put him outside time. One sees this in a poem such as "Very Seldom," written in 1914, when Cavafy was only forty-one but surely anticipating his own old age:

> He's an old man. Used up and bent,
> crippled by time and indulgence,
> he slowly walks along the narrow street.
> But when he goes inside his house to hide

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the shambles of his old age, his mind turns
to the share in youth that still belongs to him.

His verse is now recited by young men.
His visions come before their lively eyes.
Their healthy sensual minds,
their shapely taut bodies
stir to his perception of the beautiful.

This is, in my view, Cavafy at his most unconvincing. An old man shoring up a few memories of quick jousts against the ruins of old age, indeed of oblivion, is more pathetic than persuasive. In "Their Beginning," a poem recounting the aftermath of an illicit tryst, the two men part, each going off in his own direction, and Cavafy concludes: "But what profit for the life of the artist:/ tomorrow, the day after, or years later, he'll give voice/ to the strong lines that had their beginning here." After quoting from this poem, W. H. Auden, a strong admirer of Cavafy, laconically remarks: "But what, one cannot help wondering, will be the future of the artist's companion."

This seems not ever to have been a question for Cavafy, to whom the world was not organized into moral compartments. Standard morals, regular virtues, were to him not central; sin, original or unoriginal, was of no interest. In the world of his poems, politics plays as no more than the comedy of state, one man, group, or state squabbling with another man, group, or state for the power to control others. Politics allowed men to behave cruelly to one another but it did not free even those in control from the even crueller twists of fate.

Cavafy tends to admire those who accept fate like King Dimitrios, in the poem by that name, who, when the Macedonians deserted him, slipped off his golden robes, slipped into simple clothes, and "just like an actor who,/ the play over,/ changes his costume and goes away." In "The God Abandons Antony," the poet invokes Antony to read the writing on the wall, and "Above all, don't fool yourself, don't say/ it was a dream, your ears deceived you:/ don't degrade yourself with empty hopes like these."

In so many Cavafy poems, disaster lies round the corner, catastrophe waits in the wings. Although action is usually hopeless, inaction is itself a defect. Defeat in life is all but inevitable, and success, when it arrives, cannot for long be sustained. We are, in short, in the hands of the gods, the fates—call them what you will, they are full of dark surprises. The biggest mistake is to think one is in control of one's life for very long. "Fate is a traitor," says the narrator of the poem "Kimon, Son of Learchos," and *peripateia*, or reversal of fortune, is, in Cavafy's world, no more than business as usual. Nothing for it but to be honest about one's emotion, accept one's limitations, and live as best one can without illusions.

This sounds very dark, but, somehow, as it comes through Cavafy's poems, it is not. Marguerite Yourcenar has called Cavafy's "a perspective without illusions, but not desolate even so." He never lets one forget that only fools think the world is arranged for their convenience. His poems fortify one in one's determination never to underestimate life's manifold traps and treacheries; to be grateful for the simple absence of tyranny and terror; to count oneself fortunate to exist in the delight of the moment.

Cavafy provokes one to think about what truly matters in a life, and to brood on what remains when it is over. His poems cause one to consider which is more regrettable in one's life: the things done, or those left undone? Cavafy provides no answers to these questions. His achievement was to create out of historical particulars universal types who never let one forget the essential mystery of human nature. Cavafy admired those who could face this mystery without flinching, and his own poems lead one to think one has a chance to grasp that life truly is a mystery without necessarily making it any easier to face it on one's own. It was Henry James who said that "it is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance . . . and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process." Constantine Cavafy might have said the same—in fact, his poetry says exactly that.

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The eloquent whispers of Giorgio Morandi

by Karen Wilkin

The paintings of Giorgio Morandi, highly distilled visions of a private world, elicit only two responses: extreme enthusiasm or indifference. They demand a great deal of the viewer, but for enthusiasts—and I count myself among them—Morandi's reticent, modest still lifes and landscapes are immensely rewarding. For anyone who pays attention, the microcosm of his tabletop world becomes vast, the space between objects immense, pregnant, and expressive; the austere gives way to the seductive. Those impervious to Morandi's excellences say they find him boring. It's significant, I believe, that many of his most passionate fans are fellow-artists; for once, the phrase "a painter's painter" is apt, so much so that I'm sometimes tempted to use a response to Morandi as a partial measure, among artists and non-artists alike, of the ability to see or, at least, the ability to perceive issues fundamental to painting. I wasn't surprised, for example, when a colleague who writes for a large- circulation weekly, known for her openness to novelty rather than for the rigor of her eye, recently characterized Morandi as "the Italian painter of bottles lined up in a row." (She was citing Morley Safer's declared admiration for the artist as evidence that he was unqualified to have attacked the contemporary art scene on that infamous episode of "60 Minutes," but that's another matter.) As I said, you either love "the Italian painter of bottles lined up in a row" or you just don't get it.

Mind you, liking Morandi can produce odd, even cultish results. A children's book, *Antonia e le bottiglie di Morandi*—"Antonia and Morandi's Bottles"—apparently about becoming a more sensitive and perceptive person, has just been published in Italy. So far, there's no T-shirt, coffee mug, or scarf, but I know a very serious, high-minded still-life painter who named his cat "Morandi." Twenty years ago, I recall, a college friend proudly showed me how she had simultaneously solved the storage problem in her minuscule apartment and paid homage to her favorite painter by transferring all household liquids from shampoo to dish detergent into an assortment of old bottles (labels soaked off) and clustering everything on a small table. "My functional Morandi," she called it.

It wasn't much like a Morandi, of course, any more than a spill of apples on a wrinkled cloth would be like a Cézanne. What makes a Morandi a Morandi is not the fact of the bottles—neither his sole preoccupation nor the sole components of his still lifes, nor, for the record, simply "lined up in a row"—but the uncanny tensions of his compositions, the subtle relationships of his shapes, tonalities, and colors, the dry physicality of his brushy pigments, and the monumentality of his small, intimate subjects. But my friend was one of those who loved Morandi, and constantly seeing a set-up that reminded her of his paintings gave her great pleasure.

She might have been less happy with the

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effect had she been able to see more of her idol's actual pictures, but in New York in the 1970s, that wasn't easy. The museums that owned Morandis rarely exhibited them and when they did, his admittedly marvelous prints usually took precedence over paintings or drawings. Commercial shows were infrequent. Even in Italy, where Morandi was assiduously collected, it wasn't very different. There had been major museum exhibitions, awards, and honors in Morandi's lifetime, but they were long past and it was almost impossible to see much outside of private collections. (A 1972 retrospective in Rome's otherwise dismal museum of modern art was a welcome exception.) It's still not easy to see Morandi on this side of the Atlantic, apart from a very few carefully chosen exhibitions at the Stephen Haller and Paolo Baldacci galleries in New York. In Europe, museums and commercial galleries have mounted shows with greater frequency over the past decade, especially to mark the centennial of the artist's birth in 1990. Milan's Brera Museum displays a good number of pictures, a rather cranky selection of still lifes and an even crankier group of landscapes, all from the excellent Jesi Collection of modern Italian art, in a badly lit corridor, but until very recently—last October, in fact—there was no place where Morandi could regularly be seen in any depth.

Of course, there are those who will argue that none of this matters very much. While the enthusiasts among us complain about—say—having a paltry two pictures, and not particularly good ones at that, on view at Rome's Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, the indifferents will maintain that Morandi's chosen territory was so narrow that to see one or a few pictures is to have seen them all. Yet it is precisely *because* Morandi's field of inquiry is so circumscribed—still lifes of a small collection of well-known objects and landscapes that pit generic Italian trees against even more generic Italian houses—that seeing his art in some quantity is essential to an understanding of his achievement. The expressiveness Morandi could wrest from nuance, the variety he could extract from small changes, are most apparent when you can compare groups of pictures, just as the true complexity of Morandi's palette is most readily perceived when several paintings can be seen together. It is then that the breadth of his invention as a manipulator of color and tone becomes more visible than the deliberate restrictions he imposed on himself and we become aware of his ability to evoke infinite qualities of light, times of day, and shifts of mood by setting exquisitely adjusted, muted, nameless hues side by side. More Morandi, it turns out, is more.

Happily, those of us who crave larger doses can now visit the new Museo Morandi, a magnificent collection of paintings, drawings, watercolors, and prints given to the city of Bologna by the artist's sisters. Since 1975, the family has donated a total of 155 works to the municipality, along with archival material, Morandi's library, his collection of art, and the contents of his studio. Since October 4, 1993, this has all been visible in its permanent home in the fourteenth-century Palazzo Accursio, Bologna's town hall *cum* civic center *cum* municipal art gallery. In its own wing, up two ramps of the kind of stairs you could negotiate on horseback, the museum includes, along with canvases and works on paper, a curiously touching reconstruction of the artist's studio, exhibits of objects particularly dear to him and familiar to us from his pictures, and a fascinating handful of Old Master paintings and prints, from the Renaissance to Ingres, lovingly collected by Morandi, now installed in a former chapel that interrupts the modernized rooms of the museum. The Morandi Archives and Study Center, established in 1982, is at the end of the corridor. We can at last see Morandi (almost) whole, in immensely sympathetic surroundings, in the city where he spent his entire life. (Born in Bologna in 1890, he died there in 1964.)

The collection is both revealing and eccentric, revealing because it includes atypical works, particularly drawings and water-

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colors, that offer fresh insight into Morandi's evolution, and eccentric because it presents a somewhat scattershot version of more than sixty years of serious painting. There are works that offer vivid testimony to the young provincial painter's awareness of some of the most progressive art of his day: a boldly structured portrait of the artist's sister Dina, for example, painted in 1912, or a series of surprising figure drawings and heads executed by a teen-age Morandi around 1907. The portrait of Dina is obviously indebted to a French Modernist tradition, while the drawings have the bite and clarity of German Expressionist works. But to find out how the young Morandi first responded to Cubism, you still have to go to Milan, to the Brera, which is a significant problem, since the seeming realism of Morandi's mature work, his devotion to the specific and the familiar, was filtered through a deep understanding of Cubist structure. Nor are there any of the so-called "metaphysical" still lifes of the Teens in the Bologna collection—those crisply drawn images where schematic wooden figures are juxtaposed with isolated still-life vases and bottles, innocuous subjects that are somehow highly charged and slightly sinister. Their absence is conspicuous, for they mark the brief moment when the reclusive, hermetic painter was closest to his contemporaries in the Italian vanguard.

It is hoped that long-term loans and donations from other sources will fill such gaps, so that the Museo Morandi will eventually be the definitive collection of the artist's work. In the meantime, in compensation for any present lack of perfect continuity and comprehensiveness, there is a wide-ranging assortment of first-rate still-life paintings and a fine selection of the too-little-seen landscape paintings and urban scenes—economical views of the countryside near Bologna or of the *cortile* of the apartment house on the Via Fondazza where Morandi lived with his unmarried sisters. (Related images are, of course, well known from his prints.) Some of the landscapes from the 1930s and early 1940s have the suddenness and *rightness* of an unexpected view from a moving train. Light and shade become abstractions momentarily made visible (and tangible) by a transient association with walls, foliage, and earth. A narrow register of grayed, pearly tones, like the rock-solid geometric construction of these pictures, simultaneously pays homage to Cézanne and evokes the particulars of the Emilian landscape: the hazy, moist light, the elementally solid farmhouses, the dense rows of silvery juniper. The landscapes are soundless, distanced, almost dream-like, but there's nothing sentimental about Morandi's view of modern-day Italy and no nostalgia for an idyllic past. Power pylons dominate a bare-bones landscape of 1940, the arc of the wires echoing the swell of a gray-green field in the foreground. Television antennae and electric wires provide Morandi with an excuse for subtle, delicate mark-making that mediates between sky and roof line in a series of Via Fondazza paintings of the late 1950s, perhaps most successfully in a masterly construction of tightly cropped rose and ocher walls, salmon roofs, and whitened blue sky—a kind of "if Diebenkorn had been an Italian" painting.

Perhaps the most eye-testing portion of the opening installation was a pair of still lifes, both arrangements of light and dark bottles and Morandi's "signature" pitcher and jug, painted in 1951. Their centralized compositions, weighted to the right, like their grayed and golden hues, were similar but not identical; in one, for example, an additional bottle, perhaps an afterthought, introduced a note of blue-gray and intensified the picture's lively "imbalance." The serial quality of the two canvases was, of course, the point, but proximity made differences more compelling than similarities. Small shifts in proportion and placement became eloquent, as did subtle changes in touch and variations of color and tone. The single forced comparison made you go back to other works with fresh eyes, to track their likenesses and unlikenesses.

However good individual paintings or even series of paintings are in the Museo

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Morandi's initial installation, the real strength of the collection, at the moment, lies in its drawings and watercolors; there's not a weak picture on display, and the almost Oriental watercolors, in particular, are extraordinary. A large group of the justifiably celebrated etchings and engravings—nearly half of Morandi's production as printmaker—forms an interesting counterpoint. The contrast between obsessively hatched etchings, for example, and pencil drawings reduced to a few tremulous strokes diagramming the spaces between bottles, a pitcher, and a vase brings home dramatically how attuned Morandi was to the physical character of his materials. Paintings, drawings and watercolors, and prints are all carefully segregated, displayed in spaces clearly designed for the scale and character of each. It's handsome, but it would have been illuminating to have had at least one grouping of paintings and related drawings, if only to enhance our sense of how Morandi worked.

And how Morandi worked is clearly something the museum wishes to evoke. The reconstruction of his studio, a small, domestic room, at once overpoweringly cluttered and monastic, is an oddly effective footnote to the elegantly displayed works of art that came out of that studio: a narrow bed, piles of books, a high table and a low table, each covered with brown paper and jammed with the objects that Morandi turned into the characters of his private dramas, a few portfolios, two easels, their ledges thickly coated with paint, the artist's hat. (A handsome book of photographs documenting the Morandi ménage and the studio, before and during transfer to the museum, bears witness to the accuracy of the reconstruction.) Some of the painter's favorite, most frequently depicted objects are displayed in the print galleries: vases that we recognize instantly, the wooden manikin heads that appear in the metaphysical still lifes, and fragments of turned wood—chair legs? bannisters? We recognize the profiles and shapes first, but it is clear that such objects, like the bottles, boxes, and crockery that crowd the studio, were often chosen for their tone and texture as much as for their form. The vases are opaque opaline glass or ceramic, dulled by age and dust. Matteness, dullness, and neutrality obviously counted a great deal for Morandi; many objects had been brushed with flat white or grayish paint, to destroy reflections and the accidental, as though the painter were striving to distance himself from the particulars of his circumscribed subjects in order to render them as abstract geometric archetypes. Yet most startling of all is the tapering vase of roses that appears over and over again in the paintings, isolated and centerstage, not buried in a cluster of bottles. The odd rigidity and grayness of these paintings is here revealed not as stylization on Morandi's part but as literal transcription of the faded, boxy paper flowers.

This dialogue—or tug of war—between the specific and the elemental lies at the heart of Morandi's work. At times the artist seems to test how much he can simplify before the objects and places he obsessively returned to throughout his long career become unrecognizable. At other times, he backs away from generalization, insisting on particulars to the point where each bottle and vase seems as individual as the subjects of the portraits he drew as a precocious seventeen-year-old. In his prints and drawings, the pendulum swings from near-naturalism that gives full weight to the intricacies of three-dimensional illusion to near-abstraction that suppresses the non-essential and reduces forms to disembodied outlines. Yet no matter how economical or elliptical his illusions, it's clear that Morandi was deeply attached to the objects and places that were his points of departure. It's equally clear that his retreat from the brink of abstraction to the security of reference was a deliberate choice, not a failure of nerve. While Morandi's authoritative, sophisticated paintings depend on abstract relationships, he was not an abstract painter, but rather a realist who distilled extraordinarily rarefied structures from his perceptions, anchoring his most extreme inventions in ordinary experience.

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Seeing Morandi's work in Bologna makes unequivocal his double allegiance to observable reality and personal vision, in the same way that a trip to Aix-en-Provence reveals both Cézanne's debt to the colors, forms, and light of his native landscape and his staggering powers of invention. Morandi's roses and ochers, his dull browns and brick reds can be seen on any street in Bologna, just as the dusty greens of his landscapes can be found on any Emilian hillside. The pink brick, yellow stucco, and rosy stone of Bologna's streets seem intimately related not only to the color but to the very texture of Morandi's dry, almost stucco-like paint, while in the Museo Morandi itself fragments of ruined fresco high up in the immaculately plastered exhibition rooms suggest still other parallels. A view out a window of a geometric pile-up of red tile roofs, weathered to a dull rose, further enlarges the pool of comparisons.

And then there are the arcades of Bologna, the seemingly endless *portici* that line the streets, which make it possible to move through a city famous for its rainy weather protected from the elements, comfortable and dry. The arcades are everywhere, on medieval buildings, on Renaissance palazzi, on nineteenth-century apartment houses, on postwar office blocks, even on fairly modest, turn-of-the-century streets of middle-class apartments, such as the Via Fondazza. The arcades, like Morandi's still lifes, are always the same and always different. They vary in height, in rhythm, in the shape and form of their supports; some have pointed arches, some have round ones, some are flat-topped. Some have columns, some have piers, and so on. The experience of moving through them, like the experience of seeing a substantial number of Morandi's paintings, makes you acutely sensitive to subtleties, to differences in the space you penetrate, to shifts of light, to variations in the patterns of pavements, and more.

Obviously, these connections are not what makes Morandi's best works as potent as they are, but I'm not the only Morandi fan to note how enriching it is to see his work in the city where he lived and worked for more than seventy years. Umberto Eco, a long-time admirer who spoke at the museum's opening ceremonies, believes that Morandi's art was shaped by the experience of inhabiting Bologna and that knowing something of that experience is essential to any comprehension of his work.

Morandi, Eco maintained, "can be truly understood only after you have traversed the streets and the arcades of this city and have understood that an apparently uniform reddish color can differentiate house from house and street from street. Because of this, Bologna, certainly a very homogeneous city, one of the most homogeneous in terms of color and architectural forms, is never repetitious. Bologna itself is part of the Morandi Museum and must be walked through before you cross the threshold of the museum."

Eco spoke of how he first encountered a single Morandi still life in an exhibition of contemporary Italian art in his home town, when he was still a high-school student. He was enthralled by the little picture and returned to the show every day for the two weeks of its run, puzzled by how a small painting of not very much could continue to hold his interest and challenge him. Later, when he began to read about modern art, spurred by this epiphany, he wondered how Morandi could seem so modern, since his work had so little to do with what the eager young student had learned were the characteristics of modern art. Eco concluded that it had something to do with Morandi's ability to reveal variety in things that are apparently the same. (You can see how this would appeal to a semiologist.) There's obviously more to it than that, not the least being Morandi's complicated relationship to the traditional art of the past, to Cézanne, and to Cubism, but whether or not you agreed with the importance Eco attached to the role of anecdotal experience in the formation of Morandi's art, his discussion of the significance of that art in today's world was acute and illuminating.

We live, he observed, in a period when we "are pervaded by an impelling desire for

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novelty," a period "of shouting"—on television, in parliament, in literature, in the arts. "Everyone shouts too much, thinking that the new, if it is that, has to be proclaimed in the loudest possible voice."

Morandi offers us another paradigm. "Morandi is an example of how you can whisper, without ever repeating yourself, and announce that our capacity to understand the world can be infinite without being vehement, our love for things can be intense without being violent, our striving for the future continuous and fertile, without being vulgar or indecent."

It's worth the trip to Bologna. To whet your appetite, there is an excellent catalogue of the Museo Morandi's holdings, with reproductions of each work, along with comprehensive and informative entries that include the sort of information usually found in a catalogue raisonné, a complete bibliography and exhibition history for Morandi, biographical information, and a thoughtful essay by Marilena Pasquali, the director of the Morandi Archives and Study Center. It's a handsome volume, with good color reproductions—a model of what museums should be producing.

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Seneca & the idea of lyric tragedy

by Dana Gioia

Seneca was the first great Latin writer to spend his adult life in a totalitarian state. He had no personal memories of the Republic. The "Golden Age" of Augustus had ended during his adolescence. His Rome was the autocracy of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero, where political power superseded law, morality, and tradition. Seneca's character was rooted in the austere, rural disciplines of the early Republic, but he lived mostly in a decadent, imperial capital. Beyond the familiar spectacles of gladiatorial butchery and official corruption, Seneca's Rome saw a racehorse proclaimed senator, pimps serve as state counselors, and a mad emperor deify himself. Political succession consisted of assassination and military *coup d'état*. Public reformers who were not skilled opportunists were mostly killed or exiled. "If only the Roman people had a single neck," lamented Caligula. Roman artists and intellectuals still assiduously emulated the Greeks, but the capital's ruling class mostly behaved like army officers in a Latin American police state. This polluted milieu colored Seneca's artistic vision as decisively as Athenian democracy shaped Aeschylus's dramaturgy. If, as David Slavitt has suggested, Seneca's tragedies concern "the limits of the cruelty men and women can visit upon one another," his Rome gave an honest author few other topics.

Since the little attention Seneca receives today comes from classicists, he is habitually examined in relation to the Greeks. But these conventional comparisons obscure his true character—as indeed they distort the understanding of most Roman literature. It is more illuminating to compare Seneca to twentieth-century writers, not only to dramatists like Antonin Artaud but to the poets of the modern totalitarian state like Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Gottfried Benn, and Miklos Radnoti. His artistic life has more in common with the careers of Mikhail Bulgakov and Dmitri Shostakovich than with those of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The central theme of Seneca's tragedies is how to endure a world in which there is no justice, no safety from tyrants, no guarantees—political or divine—of human dignity. These questions were not theoretical in Nero's Rome. Seneca's tragedies have frequently been censured for their obsession with terror and violence; yet any ten pages of Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars* contain greater horrors than Seneca ever mounted on the stage. To criticize Seneca's tragedies for their violence is like dismissing Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* because it is gloomy.

Our knowledge of Roman tragedy is haphazard and incomplete. Seneca is the only tragedian whose work has survived except in fragments. A considerable amount of information, however, exists about pre-Senecan Latin tragedy, including at least a hundred play titles and many tempting fragments from highly regarded dramatists like Gnaeus Nevius, Quintus Ennius, Lucius Accius, and

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Marcus Pacuvius (whom Cicero, who died before Seneca's birth, considered Rome's foremost tragic poet). "Heard melodies are sweet," wrote Keats dying in Rome, "but those unheard are sweeter." Studying Latin tragedy, one is always painfully conscious of how much has been lost, how little one knows for sure, how much else depends on speculation. Only two lines remain from Ovid's celebrated *Medea* and nothing at all from Julius Caesar's version of *Oedipus*. And yet we know the relevant fact about Roman drama for studying Seneca: while Latin tragedy originally grew out of translation and imitation of the Greek repertory, it gradually developed its own style and character. By the time Seneca came to the theater, the Roman tragic tradition had already flourished for two and a half centuries—longer, that is, than the history of American literature. While Romans held the Greeks supreme in the genre (as Elizabethan poets later considered the Romans their superiors), they also boasted a huge dramatic literature full of acknowledged masterpieces. Seneca's relation to Greek drama is, therefore, more complex than his detractors usually allow. Four centuries of continuous dramatic activity stood between him and Euripides, including a rich and diverse theatrical tradition in Latin.

Aeschylus wrote over ninety plays; Sophocles produced at least 110. Only seven tragedies by each dramatist have survived. No one knows how many plays Seneca wrote, but posterity possesses ten tragedies linked to his name: *Hercules Furens* ("The Madness of Hercules"), *Troades* ("Trojan Women"), *Phoenissae* ("Phoenician Women"), *Medea*, *Phaedra* (also titled "Hippolytus"), *Oedipus*, *Agamemnon*, *Thyestes*, *Hercules Oetaeus* ("Hercules on Oeta"), and *Octavia*. Some of these plays present textual problems. The text of *Phoenissae* is incomplete, whereas the *Hercules Oetaeus*, the longest surviving classical tragedy, seems to have been greatly expanded by a later author. The compelling *Octavia*, the only extant *fabula praetexta* or Roman history play, was probably written by one of Seneca's followers, since the tragedian himself appears as a character. (Its unusual structure and dangerous political subject, however, may suggest that the tragedian wrote it for private performance.) If we place these three problem texts to one side, Seneca, like Aeschylus and Sophocles, survives with seven complete tragedies of undisputed authorship. This is not many plays from which to understand the entire tradition of Roman tragedy, but it does provide enough depth and diversity to judge the merits of an individual author.

If Seneca's plays survived the sack of Rome, the burning of libraries, the leaky roofs of monasteries, the appetites of beetle larvae, and the slow erosions of rot and mildew, they have not had a conspicuously easier time among modern critics, who dismiss them both for too closely resembling Greek models and for too freely departing from them. As Frederick Ahl has observed, "No field of literary study rivals that of Latin poetry in so systematically belittling the quality of its works and authors." And no genre has suffered more consistent disparagement than Roman tragedy. The critical challenge in assessing Seneca is quite simple—to see his plays as works of art in their own right, and to understand how they fit into the tradition of European tragedy. To begin this task, however, one must be willing to see the changes he made in dramatic style and structure as conscious innovations, not as unintentional failings. For all his learned borrowing from Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles, Seneca's aesthetic has little in common with Periclean tragedy. His dramaturgy marks not only a deliberate departure from the Greek tradition but a radical reconception of the genre from narrative to lyric terms.

From Aristotle to the Enlightenment, influential theories of tragedy have emphasized the connection between the genre's emotional force and its characteristic narrative concentration and coherence. Sophocles was the first playwright to understand the power tragic theater gains by carefully ar-

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ranging the story line. The tragic mode, he realized—unlike epic, comedy, or romance—cannot easily assimilate episodic material. Sophocles' innovation was not lost on Aristotle, who called plotting "the first principle . . . the soul of tragedy." Two and a half millennia before Edgar Allan Poe explained that the short story must integrate every element of the work to create a single pattern of effect, the Athenians had applied this aesthetic to tragedy. Italian Renaissance commentators, reading the *Poetics* through the lens of Seneca, mistakenly extrapolated Aristotle's practical observations on Sophoclean compression into a general theory of the dramatic unities of time, place, and action. Though it is now mandatory to mock the Italian aestheticians and their Enlightenment disciples, surely these cognoscenti understood something essential about the poetic integrity of tragic drama, even if they expressed it too schematically.

Classical tragedy achieves its harrowing impact through extreme compression and integration—of plotting, language, character, imagery, and ideas. The Greek tragedians carefully foreshadow and foreshorten the central dramatic action to create a single narrative line that moves in measured steps to a fateful and usually dire conclusion while also ironically underpinning key events along the way. The Italians were correct in observing that such plotting works most naturally when a play unfolds in a single setting during a short period of time and focuses on the actions of a single character. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, for instance, Oedipus rarely leaves the stage except during the choral dances; even during his few exits the onstage action still focuses mostly on him. No one can dispute the dramatic effectiveness of the Sophoclean method. Playwrights from Euripides to Agatha Christie have employed it to create theatrical intensity and suspense. There is, however, no reason to believe that linear narrative is the only method suitable for tragedy.

Seneca's plots focus less narrowly on a single protagonist or the unfolding of a single narrative line. In *Hercules Furens*, for instance, the title character does not even appear until the third act, and no sooner does Hercules enter than he rushes away to his next battle. Euripides' *Herakles*, which served as Seneca's chief source, also delays the hero's entry until midway, but the radical difference between the Athenian and Senecan aesthetics becomes obvious when one studies what both dramatists do when Hercules is offstage.

Euripides presents the plot of *Herakles* in straightforward, narrative terms. As the play opens, Amphitryon (Herakles' stepfather) and Megara (Herakles' wife) bemoan the hero's absence. While Herakles has gone into the underworld to complete his last labor, the capture of Cerberus, Lycus has usurped the throne of Thebes. He has also slaughtered all the royal family except Megara and her children. Impoverished and unprotected, Amphitryon and Megara wait for Lycus to kill them. Soon the tyrant, who believes Herakles will never return from Hades, arrives and orders their deaths. Herakles' family prepares for their execution by going into their house to dress the children in burial garments. When they return to face execution, they witness Herakles' arrival. After a long exchange with his family, the hero leads them to safety in their house. Ignorant of Herakles' return, Lycus returns with his henchmen. He goes into the house to kill the family, where Herakles kills him. The first half of the play is now complete. Herakles has rescued his family, but the audience understands the bitter irony of his deed. Soon the hero will go mad and kill his wife and children.

Compared to Euripides' linear exposition, the first three acts of Seneca's *Hercules Furens* initially seem diffuse and indirect. Most of the Euripidean story is present. Indeed, Seneca even added a striking plot twist with Lycus offering to spare Megara and her family if she marries him to give legitimacy to his rule. But despite his reputation for peroration, Seneca has compressed the traditional plot into a fraction of Euripides' length. He handles the narrative scenes expertly, and his new material on Lycus and

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Megara is dramatically arresting. Seneca's provocative originality, however, comes from what he adds. The first act of *Hercules Furens* is a single, extended soliloquy by the goddess Juno. Her tense and angry scene, which lasts 204 lines in the Latin, begins at a high emotional pitch and modulates ever higher to an almost unbearable level of passion. Standing beneath the night sky of Thebes, Juno starts by venting her anger at her notoriously unfaithful husband (and brother), Jupiter:

> Call me sister of the thunder god.
> That is the only title I have left.
> Once I was wife and queen to Jupiter,
> But now, abandoned by his love and shamed
> By his perpetual adultery,
> I leave my palace to his mistresses.
> Why not choose earth when heaven is a whorehouse?

Seneca's characters usually view nature subjectively. They amplify their emotions until their passions color the world around them. While his Juno would never condescend to mere fairness, she has good reason for finding the constellations infuriating; most of them commemorate the deification of Jupiter's paramours and illegitimate offspring.

> Even the Zodiac has now become
> A pantheon of prostitutes and bastards.
> Look at Callisto shining in the north,
> That glittering slut now guides the Argive fleet.
> Or see how Taurus rises in the south,
> Not only messenger of spring's warm nights
> But the gross trophy of Europa's rape!
> Or count the stormy Pleiades—those nymphs
> Who terrorize the waves, once warmed Jove's bed.
> Watch young Orion swaggering with his sword,
> A vulgar upstart challenging the gods,
> While gaudy Perseus flaunts his golden star.
> Gape at the constellations Jove awarded
> Castor and Pollux, his twin bastard sons.
> And now not only Bacchus and his mother
> Parade their ill-begotten rank in heaven,
> But my great husband, lord of lechery,
> Discarding his last shred of decency,
> Has crowned his drunken bastard's slut with stars!

Juno's tirade is quintessential Seneca—simultaneously learned, theatrical, and emotional. He piles one example of Jove's infidelity on another until Juno's language and emotions reach an exploding point. Senecan tragedy is not for those who delight in economy and understatement. The goddess soon moves on to the real object of her hatred, Hercules, whom she has tried to destroy since infancy. Now that he has completed his final labor by capturing Cerberus, she fears Jove will deify him. She recounts his exploits derisively and then rehearses all the possibilities for vengeance. Only one method, she realizes, can overcome the hero's unconquerable strength—madness. She then summons up the hellish furies who will carry out her plan:

> . . . There is
> A cavern buried deep in Tartarus
> Where guilty souls are tortured through eternity
> By unappeasable guardians of pain.
> I summon up those primal deities.
> Come to me, Discord, goddess of destruction.
> Bring up the secret horrors of the damned
> That even Hercules has never seen.
> Come to me goddesses of Violence
> And rash Impiety whose filthy hands
> Are stained with family blood. Come to me, Error.
> And come to me, you whom I most desire,
> Goddess of Madness, who turns men on themselves,
> You who will be the spur of my revenge.

Juno's speech must rank among drama's most extravagant and ardent expressions of female anger—a poetic equivalent of an operatic diva's grandest scene. It is a dazzling mix of poetry, rhetoric, and theater—written in Seneca's characteristically flamboyant and allusive style. But once finished, Juno walks offstage never to reappear. Hercules arrives at the opening of the third act, dragging

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Cerberus in chains and accompanied by Theseus, whom he has freed from the underworld. Learning of Lycus's audacious crimes, Hercules immediately leaves to seek revenge. Theseus is now alone with Megara and Amphitryon, and Seneca adds another series of speeches unlike anything in Euripides.

Seneca devotes most of the third act of *Hercules Furens* to a sequence of poetic set pieces describing the underworld. Amphitryon is eager to know about the afterlife and his stepson's adventures in Hades. He asks Theseus a series of brief questions to each of which Theseus replies at length. Theseus's speeches constitute a remarkable narrative poem (Seneca's dark and revisionary response to the *catabasis*—the descent into the underworld—in Virgil's *Aeneid*) that presents a horrifying vision of the afterlife:

> There are no grassy meadows bright with
> flowers,
> No fields of ripened corn swaying in the wind,
> No soft green vistas for the eye, or groves
> Where branches bend with slowly sweetening
> fruit,
> No breezes spiced with odors of the plum.
> But only wasteland everywhere, the fields
> Unwatered and untilled, the soil exhausted
> And nothing moving on the silent land.
> And this is how life ends—
> This barren place, this country of despair,
> Where no wind blows and darkness never lifts,
> With hopeless sorrow twisting every shadow.
> Dying is bitter, but eternity
> Confined in this black place is worse.

While Theseus's speeches tell of Hercules' exploits, they—like Juno's tirade—seem to exist independently as poems in their own right. Largely narrative in structure, they are primarily lyric in effect; they vividly convey the private anger, terror, and agony of their speakers. One finds similar episodes in all of the other plays—Creon's description of Tiresias's sacrifice in *Oedipus*, the messenger's account of Hippolytus's death in *Phaedra*, the soliloquy of Aggripina's ghost in *Octavia*, and perhaps the most powerful, the messenger's chilling depiction of Atreus butchering his nephews in *Thyestes*. It is always dangerous to guess an author's intention, but one suspects that Seneca conceived of these speeches as daring *coups de théâtre*, show-stopping recitations that push the genre of tragic drama to the furthest limit of the form. The scenes contain some of Seneca's finest poetry because if they do not imaginatively overpower the audience, the dramatic fabric of the play would disintegrate. These moments must be magnificent, or they are nothing. Surely a major reason for Seneca's current obscurity in this Latinless age has been the inadequacy of most translations in conveying the essentially poetic quality of his dramatic language.

Juno's tirade and Theseus's narration are so much longer and more ostentatious than the play's narrative requirements demand that the reader is left with only two possible explanations. First is the conventional view that the playwright is dramatically incompetent. (This is Herbert J. Muller's charge that Seneca is "indifferent to form" and lacks "economy, purity, symmetry, appropriateness of any sort.") The second interpretation is that Seneca knows exactly what he is doing here (and in similar places throughout his other plays) but that his artistic aims differ radically from those of his Greek predecessors.

This observation leads to the central issue in assessing Seneca's tragedies—in what context shall they be judged? Works of art are always evaluated—explicitly or implicitly—against a tradition. The concept of genre—be it revenge tragedy, bedroom farce, or Hollywood western—assumes a set of shared expectations between artist and audience concerning subject, form, and style. Tradition is necessarily a dynamic concept; only dead traditions do not change. Significant new works alter or enlarge the genres in which they work, just as mediocre or derivative works exhaust or debase a tradition. The death of verse tragedy came at the hands of a thousand uninspired neoclassical playwrights whose sober imitations slowly strangled the tradition. By the twen-

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tieth century, only isolated acts of poetic genius—like García Lorca's *Blood Wedding*—could temporarily resurrect the genre; even brilliant attempts like Eliot's *The Family Reunion* or W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood's *The Ascent of F-6* only charmed the corpse halfway out of the grave.

Seneca's plays, however, do not fit comfortably into either the dominant ancient or modern traditions of European tragedy. Classical scholars, who are trained to compare ancient texts with their sources and parallels, habitually evaluate Seneca retrospectively in relation to earlier Greek drama. This method implicitly overemphasizes the conservative elements in Seneca's dramas and ignores the revisionary nature of his aesthetic. As Moses Hadas observed, "If we choose to call Seneca's plays Greek tragedies, we must pronounce them debased." Judged by the Aristotelian aesthetic of tragedy as a public, narrative genre, Seneca's plays hardly make sense. His asymmetrical expositions, lyric digressions, subjective psychology, scene-stealing ancillary characters, and spectacular violence mock Athenian taste and decorum. Likewise Seneca's plays make little dramatic sense judged by the assumptions of realist drama, especially the works of Henrik Ibsen, who invented the most influential form of modern prose tragedy. Judged as realist drama, Seneca's plays appear bombastic, lurid, schematic, and dramatically inert. They rely too exclusively on the power of speech to portray human action, rather than presenting the action itself. Their characteristic eloquence often misses the elusive truths that slip between and behind words. His sensational plots explore emotional extremes at the expense of understanding the pathos of the ordinary. Seneca is no more satisfactory as Eugene O'Neill than as Euripides.

Neither aesthetic, however, seems intrinsically appropriate to the author of *Hercules Furens*, *Phaedra*, and *Thyestes*. Seneca's concept of tragedy is neither narrative nor sociological; it is lyric and poetic. If he is to be understood as a dramatist, he must be seen as an innovator, the creator of a new theatrical genre—lyric tragedy. While the new genre was historically rooted in the Athenian tradition, by selectively emphasizing and exploring certain features of the original form, it developed into a distinctive type of tragic theater. Seneca's highly allusive style, which incorporates a myriad of elements large and small from earlier Greek and Roman writers, has blinded many critics to the sheer novelty of his artistic aims. In this sense Seneca resembled modernist poets like Pound, Eliot, Montale, Radnoti, and Mandelstam; he was meticulously attentive to the tradition he had transformed.

Lyric poetry presents the sensibilities of a speaker at a particular moment often in a specific place and time. It seeks to capture with compelling exactitude a single, intensely unified experience. The lyric mode is subjective, heightened, and emotional. Originally sung, lyric poetry still aspires to the conditions of music. One might characterize lyric tragedy, therefore, as a form of spoken drama that aspires to the conditions of opera. While it presents a story (because lyric tragedy no less than opera needs narrative structure to provide cohesion), the plot is primarily a means to the genre's real artistic end—the vivid depiction and amplification of its characters' subjective experience. The purpose of plotting, therefore, is not to create narrative suspense but to lead the spectator through a sequence of extended lyric moments that combine into a powerfully expressive total design.

Seneca builds his tragedies around a series of arresting, emotional, lyric moments—verbal arias, duets, and choruses—designed to move the audience to a heightened emotional state. If one reads Seneca looking primarily for the story, one will inevitably be disappointed. His tragedies are well-plotted, but Seneca rarely explores the expressive possibilities of narrative. His central artistic concern is to convey the most extreme states of human suffering. Eliot was correct, therefore, in asserting that "'plot' in the sense in which we find plot in *The Spanish Tragedy* does not exist for Seneca." Slyly, Eliot went on to observe:

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> He took a story perfectly well known to everybody, and interested his auditors entirely by his embellishments of description and narrative and by smartness and pungency of dialogue; suspense and surprise attached solely to verbal effect.

One might push Eliot's insight even further to reach the essence of Senecan tragedy. Perhaps Seneca's particular genius lay in understanding that the only way he could charge the familiar tragic plots with their original cathartic intensity—especially to a Roman audience inured to violence and injustice whether in the Coliseum or the imperial court—was by putting his auditors inside his character's sensibility. Seneca was not concerned with creating "suspense or surprise"; he wanted pity and terror. He willingly traded narrative complexity, symmetry, and momentum for the opportunity to achieve imaginative force and immediacy. Seneca has been rightly praised for the psychological complexity of his protagonists. His Hercules, Phaedra, Thyestes, Medea, and Oedipus are not flat stereotypes; their personalities contain the virtues, weaknesses, and contradictory impulses that Aristotle demanded for the complex character of the tragic protagonist. Seneca, however, puts this deep psychology to unusual ends; he is less interested in how his characters act in tragic circumstances than in how they feel. What inspires him both as dramatist and as poet is imagining what it is like to experience unbearable levels of pain and passion.

The subjectivity of Senecan lyric tragedy leads to a structural idiosyncrasy in the plays. The most important connections between scenes are not always logical or narrative but imagistic and emotional. Lyric poetry often works most effectively by talking around a subject rather than addressing it directly. Seneca's originality as a dramatist was to incorporate elaborately crafted scenes that are tangential to a play's plot but central to its subtext. Juno's dazzling soliloquy in *Hercules Furens* is largely superfluous to the narrative. Likewise Theseus's extensive descriptions of the underworld could have been compressed into a single speech. What Seneca accomplishes by expanding these episodes is to submerge his audience in the psychic environment of the play. Juno's uncontrollable rage sets the tense emotional tone of the story; her fear of Hercules ironically prefigures the terror others will feel during his murderous rampage. When she describes his vainglorious conquest of the underworld, her palpable horror suggests the terrible consequences of his profanation of death's mysteries. Theseus's own obsession with the darkness and emptiness of Hell implies Hercules' unrecognized vulnerability to its destructive effects. No one can escape the primal forces he has unleashed by opening the gates of Hell. Juno's and Theseus's powerful set pieces saturate the audience with the images, ideas, and sensations needed to understand the play's horrifying climax. As Seneca demonstrates, there are other ways than narrative to foreshadow tragic events and establish dramatic irony.

One also sees the essentially lyric nature of Seneca's tragedy in his use of the chorus. Greek tragedy began as a series of choral songs and dances. Thespis reportedly created drama by introducing a single actor impersonating a mythic or legendary character who conversed with the chorus. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides added more actors and elaborated the narrative elements, but the role of the chorus remained primary to Greek tragedy. Even in Euripides, it remained onstage during the entire drama and represented the public nature of the genre. Seneca has frequently been criticized for denying his chorus any meaningful role in the action. If Seneca's plays were fully staged—and there is much debate on the issue of how they were performed—then the chorus appears frequently to disappear into the wings. It rarely speaks except during the elaborate choral odes between each act. While Seneca denies the chorus a dramatic role, he gives it a central function in the lyric structure of his plays. His long choral odes explore, amplify, and supplement the mood of the plays. They frame the dramatic scenes around them in poetic terms. These odes

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show Seneca's largely unrecognized gift as a lyric poet. The final chorus from *Oedipus*, to choose one example out of many, opens with rare elegance and power:

> Fatis agimur; cedite fatis.
> non sollicitae possunt curae
> mutare rati stamina fusi.
> quidquid patimur mortale genus,
> quidquid facimus venit ex alto,
> servatque suae decreta colus
> Lachesis nulla revoluta manu.
> omnia secto tramite vadunt
> primusque dies dedit extremum.

One need not know Latin to appreciate the overt musicality of these lines. Sounds echo across and between lines. The language is stately and epigrammatically exact (most lines have only four carefully chosen and arranged words). To catch the flavor of the passage a Latinless reader might profit from looking at more than one translation. E. F. Watling conveys the majestic tone of the original, while Rachel Hadas emulates its lapidary compression:

> Fate guides us; let Fate have her way.
> No anxious thought of ours can change
> The pattern of the web of destiny.
> All that we do, all that is done to us,
> Mortals on earth, comes from a power above.
> Lachesis measures out the portions
> Spun from her distaff, and no other hand
> Can turn the spindle back.
> All creatures move on their appointed paths;
> In their beginning is their end.
> (Watling)

> By fate propelled, to fate we yield.
> No fussy gestures set us free.
> It is decreed, our human doom,
> all from above. Lachesis' laws
> (tightly she grasps them) point one way.
> Through narrow channels our lives move:
> our first day singles out our last.
> (Hadas)

Seneca's transformation of the chorus into an entirely lyric and meditative device also highlights a fundamental difference between his conception of drama and the modern ideal. Despite his occasional employment of spectacle—Hercules' entry dragging Cerberus, Medea's exit in a chariot drawn by the flying dragons, or Atreus uncovering a platter to reveal the heads of Thyestes' sons—the dramatic action in Seneca's plays is overwhelmingly located in the language. Just as the *bel canto* tragedies of Donizetti and Bellini assumed the human voice's ability to convey everything essential to the drama, lyric tragedy rests on the assumption that poetic speech can articulate everything necessary to create tragic theater. Needless to say, contemporary theater no longer assumes the clarifying power of speech—whether in poetry or prose—as the central dynamic of drama. If anything unites the divergent aesthetics of Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Joe Orton, David Mamet, Caryl Churchill, and Harold Pinter, it is a belief in the deceptions of speech and the expressive power of the inarticulate.

Can it be sheer coincidence, however, that it was those ages that understood and appreciated Seneca's aesthetic that produced the most enduring verse tragedies since the Greeks? When Seneca's reputation stood at its highest in England, France, Spain, and Italy, those traditions created the finest poetic drama in their histories. Can it also be mere chance that, as Seneca fell out of favor in Western Europe, poetic tragedy became a marginal theatrical genre? (Eastern Europe, never entirely part of Latin culture, followed a different course of development.) This is not the same as saying that Seneca's presence or absence had these effects on drama, only that a culture's ability to hear and understand how Seneca's plays worked reflected a broader faculty to marry poetry and serious drama. An unqualified conviction that tragedy requires the intensification of poetic speech is not only the tenet that separates Seneca from contemporary drama; it is also the belief that divides Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Racine from Büchner, Ibsen, and O'Neill.

Seneca's tragedies represent the ultimate

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development of poetic drama. While they outwardly fulfill the narrative requirements of theater, the effects they pursue are intrinsically poetic. Lyric tragedy balances on the border between what Aristotle called the "imitated human action" of drama and the purely verbal representation of poetry. If one were to push Seneca's aesthetic one step farther, the dramatic structure would disintegrate, and one would be left with the dramatic poetic sequence, like Tennyson's *Maud*, Hardy's *The Dynasts*, or Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius*.

Judged by their proper standards, the lyric tragedies of Seneca are considerable achievements. His much abused *Thyestes*, the most violent and gruesome play in the Western canon, is a dark and disturbing masterpiece. It was not only for its sensational plot that this play became one of the most influential tragedies ever written. Its feverish emotion and poetic energy make it an overwhelming experience to read. The sexually charged *Phaedra* and razor-edged *Medea*, which Eliot considered Seneca's best plays, are equally compelling. *Hercules Furens*, which Eliot raided for both "Marina" and *The Waste Land*, is Seneca's most innovative tragedy. Alternately violent, visionary, phantasmagoric, and poetic, it demonstrates the imaginative possibilities of lyric tragedy. The often splendid *Hercules Oetaeus* is less successful in dramatic terms, but with its great length, large cast, and double chorus, it shows the Senecan lyric form pushing beyond the limits of theatrical tragedy. *Hercules Oetaeus* is an unacknowledged ancestor of both dramatic poems like Goethe's *Faust* and romantic grand operas like Berlioz's Virgilian *Les Troyens*. Seneca's *Oedipus* will always suffer in comparison to Sophocles' masterpiece, but read on its own terms, it is a potent poetic drama and may illustrate most vividly the existential bleakness of Seneca's vision.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* the final scenes lay the groundwork for a new social order. Although Oedipus's individual suffering remains primary, it is depicted in a civic context. Creon is already implicitly in charge. As he leads the blinded Oedipus away, the promise of health and prosperity returns to Thebes. In Seneca's *Oedipus*, however, the dramatic focus remains mercilessly on the suffering king; he has no comforters. In Sophocles, Oedipus blinds himself out of shame; he cannot bear to see his children or face his father in the underworld. Seneca's Oedipus puts out his eyes because death would be too easy; he wants to protract his agony and make his suffering commensurate with his sins. When Seneca's Oedipus staggers out of Thebes, alone and unconsoled, he may grimly take his curse with him, but the author offers no hint that his suffering will redeem the city.

Seneca's tragic vision admits no escape from evil, no defense against the mindless brutality of fate. The gods may witness human suffering, but they do nothing to prevent or amelioriate it. There is no welcome *deus ex machina*. When divinities intervene, they come like raging Juno in *Hercules Furens* or avenging Venus and Neptune in *Phaedra*. The supernatural world is represented by vindictive spirits and hellish demigods, as in the opening of *Thyestes*, where a demonic Fury drives the ghost of Tantalus out of Hell to provoke his grandson Atreus to unspeakable revenge. The eternal realm is less likely to endow the mortal world with grace than to pollute it with madness and evil. Hercules may have escaped physically from the underworld in *Hercules Furens*, but its forbidden knowledge has infected his spirit in ways he will not understand until too late. The end of *Thyestes* may be the bleakest conclusion in all tragedy. Atreus has killed and dismembered his nephews and tricked his brother Thyestes into publicly eating his own children at a banquet. Evil is joyfully triumphant. The innocent have been viciously destroyed. The hero has no shred of dignity left, only shame, horror, and defeat. And yet Seneca has kept the reader fixed and fascinated during the terrifying spectacle. He has managed the difficult but essential feat of magic theater—to lure the audience to the edge of the abyss to watch a fellow human's

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sudden fall to destruction, to make them feel the injustice and agony of the doomed without ever wanting to turn away.

A genius for tragic drama is the rarest literary talent. In the history of European theater from the beginning of Athenian drama in 535 B.C. (when Pisistratus established the first public competition in tragedy) to the advent of Realism, only a few writers have managed to create enduring bodies of work in the genre. After naming the supreme masters of tragedy— Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Corneille, and Racine—whom else can we list without sensing a significant falling-off in ambition, intensity, or quality? Goethe's *Faust* may be a masterpiece but it is no tragedy, and his other plays lack the dark intensity that characterizes the tragic mode. The once influential tragedies of Alfieri, Voltaire, Hugo, and Grillparzer now seem like elegant but dusty museum pieces. The best plays of Marlowe, Ford, and Webster remain vivid but also remind one of how uneven the rest of their work is. There are individual tragedies that stand on the higher levels of the genre—Schiller's *Maria Stuart*, Büchner's *Woyzeck*, Marlowe's *Edward II*, Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, Musset's *Lorenzaccio*, and Milton's *Samson Agonistes*—but their authors (with the possible exception of Schiller) did not create total dramatic *oeuvres* equal to these isolated masterpieces. Perhaps a few tragedians like Büchner and Marlowe possessed a commensurate, native genius for the form, but they had no time to develop. Sophocles lived to be ninety and wrote until the end; Büchner died of typhus at twenty-three, and Marlowe was killed in a tavern brawl at twenty-nine, an age at which Shakespeare was still a journeyman dramatist. Had they lived they might have immensely enriched the canon of tragedy, but such is the difficulty of the genre that even their truncated careers stand out.

The tradition of tragedy is a jagged, discontinuous line. The gaps and failures represent its problematic character more truthfully than its rare and often isolated triumphs. An extraordinary number of Europe's greatest writers struggled unsuccessfully with the form. In nineteenth-century England alone Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Landor, Hunt, Browning, Arnold, Tennyson, and Swinburne attempted to revive tragic theater. But the genre not only requires a double genius in poetry and theater, it also demands a fierce dialectical imagination that can face the unjust and irrational mockery of fate without flinching. If few authors possess the mandatory gifts, fewer ages permit the necessary vision.

It is against this small and fitful tradition that Seneca's work must ultimately be judged. He does not stand with the handful of tragedy's supreme masters. He lacks the genius for dramatic narrative of Shakespeare and Sophocles. He rarely achieves the perfect imaginative balance and compression of Racine. He lacks the innate theatricality of Euripides. And yet, once his plays are understood on their own terms, his dark, lyric tragedies can hold their own against the rest of the tradition. Seneca's plays display poetic integrity, psychological depth, linguistic force, and unsurpassed emotional intensity. The sheer originality of Seneca's concept of tragedy and the frenetic energy of his dramatic execution give his plays extraordinary impact. No dramatist has ever portrayed a darker vision of human existence. No tragedians except Shakespeare and Sophocles exerted a stronger influence on posterity. Seneca's plays were the matrix from which the Renaissance gave birth to modern tragedy. If his reputation has long been in decline, it is time to ask how much of that falling off reflected not only a general disparagement of all Latin literature but also a distrust of poetry itself as a dramatic medium. Readers willing to approach Seneca without preconceptions will find a profound and original tragic poet. "Time discovers truth," he once wrote. Perhaps our time will rediscover him.

(This is Part II of a two-part essay. Part I appeared in our December issue.)

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Lycus proposes marriage
a scene from Seneca's "Hercules Furens" adapted by Dana Gioia

LYCUS
(*in soliloquy*)

Now I am sovereign over all of Thebes,
Its wealthy towns, its sloping countryside,
All the lush valley of the swift Ismenus,
Even the isthmus stretching to the south.
Stand on the summit of Mount Cithaeron
And everything you see in all directions
Is mine.
But no one ever gave it to me.
I am no heir. I have no noble name
Or great estate of ancient lineage,
No lofty family tree or courtly title.
All I was given was ferocious courage.
Nobles who brag about their ancestors
Extol the virtues that belong to others.
But when you seize a dynasty, you hold it
Nervously in your hands. Only sheer force
Can keep it yours. Everything you possess
Against the people's will comes by the sword.
No kingdom built on foreign soil is safe.

But there exists one person who can help
Secure my throne—the king's surviving daughter.
If I could take Megara as my bride,
Her ancient blood would give my new regime
Legitimacy in the public eye.
I hardly think she will refuse my suit.

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Sharing my bed will let her share my throne.
But if she stubbornly declines my offer,
I have no choice but to annihilate
Both her and all the house of Hercules.
Popular opinion will surge against me,
But if there is one thing that monarchs know,
It's how to bear the public's hatred calmly.
Now is my chance. Fortune rewards audacity.
There is Megara, praying at the altar,
Still wearing the black veil of a mourning widow.
And next to her is old Amphitryon,
The one who really fathered Hercules.

(*He addresses* MEGARA.)

Dear Princess of the royal house of Thebes,
I need a moment with you to discuss
Matters of great importance to us both.
We must be open-minded. Life is so short.
There is no good in nourishing resentment
Or letting anger fester in the heart.
Conflict will never end if both the victor
And vanquished are unwilling to disarm.
A lengthy civil war can have no winners.
Picture a kingdom with its farms in ruins,
The fields unploughed, the villages burned down,
The commonwealth a heap of bones and ashes.
A prudent victor wants the peace restored.
The conquered know it is their only hope.
So won't you join me in rebuilding Thebes?
Come share my throne. I offer you this pledge
Of my good faith. Give me your hand in peace.
Why stand so silently? Why be so scornful?

MEGARA

How can I touch a hand still smeared with blood
From slaughtering my father and my brothers?
You'll sooner find a sunset in the East
Or snowflake's glitter in a roaring fire.
Why not ask Sicily to uproot itself
And join its rocky coast to Italy?

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Why not stand on Euboe's storm-swept shore
And tell the crashing, white-capped waves to stop?
You took my father from me and my kingdom,
My brothers and my home—what else is left?
And yet I still have something dearer to me
Than father, brother, kingdom, or estate—
My hatred of you! And how I detest
Having to share it with the common crowd.
How minuscule my loathing is to theirs.
Go on and rule—bloated with arrogance,
Puffed up with self-importance. But remember.
The gods avenge such pride.
Look at our past—
How tragedy pursues the House of Thebes.
You know our queens not only suffered evil
But have inflicted it. Remember Oedipus
Whose murder and incest pollute the name
Of father, husband, child. Think how his sons
Killed one another squabbling for the crown,
Or how Niobe saw her children slaughtered
And turned into a stone dripping with tears.
Even great Cadmus, founder of our city,
Was cursed and changed into a crested serpent
To crawl across the wastelands of Illyria.
These are the precedents of your regime.
Do what you will as tyrant but remember
One day the doom of Thebes will fall on you.

LYCUS

Calm down, my dear. Enough of this mad talk.
Even your late husband, Hercules,
Knew kings must be obeyed. I've conquered Thebes.
My power is absolute. I don't explain;
I give commands. But since it's you I talk to,
I'll say a few words on my own behalf.
Yes, your old father died in a cruel battle
Along with your two brothers. I'm afraid
Weapons of war observe no decencies.
Once swords are drawn, they are not easily
Held back or put away. Wars feed on blood.
You feel your father died defending his realm

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While I was motivated by ambition.
Perhaps that's true, but once a war is over
Most people don't care much about the cause.
The only thing that matters is the outcome.
So let's forget about the awful past—
It can't be changed. For when the victor wants
To lay his weapons down, it's not unreasonable
To hope the vanquished put away their hate.
I don't ask you to grovel on your knees
And swear allegiance to my sovereignty.
I like the way you stand up for your rights.
High spirits are attractive in a woman.
You deserve to be my queen. Come marry me.

MEGARA

A chill of horror makes by body tremble.
I can't believe your shameful proposition.
When war erupted, I wasn't afraid.
I faced each terror calmly—even when
The fighting echoed round the city walls.
But when you mention marriage, then I shudder.
For the first time I truly realize
I'm just another slave captured in war.
Load me with chains or make me suffer death
By slow starvation. No torture you devise
Will break my loyalty to Hercules.
If I must die, I swear I will die his.

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Music

Lincoln Center's chamber-music problems

by Samuel Lipman

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, started in 1969, was one of the last constituent members of the Lincoln Center culturopolis to be founded. Resident at Alice Tully Hall, which was named after the munificent patron of both the hall and the Chamber Music Society, the organization is now celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary season. The festivities began in October with a "Live from Lincoln Center" telecast. The program included a newly commissioned composition, three staples of the chamber-music repertory, tributes to chamber music from a painter and two famous writers, snippets of a rehearsal, and a celebrity host —Hugh Downs—wrapping all the creative joy together.

The television program was clearly meant to serve both as a summation of the group's past and as a foretaste of its future. It therefore deserves careful critical consideration not only as a concert but also as a diagnosis of where chamber-music performance at the highest level stands today in America. But before I discuss the television program and its significance, a brief history of the leadership and the animating conception of the Chamber Music Society is in order.

The longstanding patronage of the musically sophisticated Miss Tully and the generous assistance of a socially prestigious board make it clear that the Chamber Music Society has been a worthy expression of the spirit of cultural *noblesse oblige*. At one time, this spirit animated much musical patronage. Today, it seems to be disappearing before our eyes. There are many reasons for this. The rise of government and corporation support; grants from foundations whose activities are divorced from the intentions of their founders; the increased artistic policy-making power of administrators; the aggressive use of mass-marketing techniques in fund raising: all have helped to undermine the enlightened patronage that once marked the support of our institutions of high culture.

The first artistic director of the Chamber Music Society was the pianist Charles Wadsworth. Born in 1929, Wadsworth had enjoyed a distinguished musical education, studying with the pianist Rosalyn Tureck and the singer Povla Frijsh in New York, and the singer (and artistic partner of Francis Poulenc) Pierre Bernac in Paris. He was the accompanist of such celebrities as Beverly Sills, Pinchas Zukerman, and the lesser-known but marvelous vocal recitalists Jennie Tourel and Hermann Prey. He directed the renowned chamber-music series at Gian Carlo Menotti's Spoleto Festival from 1960 through 1977. At the Chamber Music Society, Wadsworth's long tenure (he left in 1989) was marked by his practice of hiring respected but not famous musicians, many of them active on the New York scene, to form the core of the ensemble. He also brought in famous performers as guest players for individual appearances and com-

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missioned much new music for small ensembles. His contribution to the Chamber Music Society went beyond all this, however. By talking to audiences, he created a close and warm bond with the public, a bond the memories of which still linger to this day.

Nevertheless, musically Wadsworth's performance as artistic director was less impressive. Although he was using the best talent available to him—and although he exerted a strong influence on the playing from his seat at the piano—the level of performance often lagged behind all the good feelings. This happened despite the occasional assistance of star musicians such as Leonard Bernstein, Pierre Boulez, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Itzhak Perlman, Sills, Zukerman, and even the jazz pianist Chick Corea. A lot of people went to the concerts, a lot of people had a good time. In the end, though, little of permanent musical value remained. Indeed, the Society's chief legacy—the only thing that was much talked about, anyway—was the boost its concerts gave to the reputation and performance of chamber music in the United States.

As the 1980s wore on, one sensed that the Chamber Music Society was in a period of stagnation. Performances were comfortable rather than brilliant, lulling rather than exciting, dutiful rather than virtuosic. The critics no longer had an automatic good word for the group's concerts, and the press superlatives seemed harder and harder to find. Perhaps worst of all, the audience, like the playing members of the Society—many of whom had been with the group since its beginning—seemed to be getting older, and the number of subscribers was said to be dropping.

For those in power, these depressing signs pointed to a single conclusion: it was time for a new broom, and preferably a young one. The goal was splash and glitter, supported by that audience of the young that was supposedly just dying to come to classical-music concerts—so long, that is, as they didn't contain too much classical music. The answer seemed to lie close at hand: Wadsworth's replacement was Fred Sherry (born 1948), a New York free-lance cellist and something of a regular on the contemporary-music scene. Sherry had been a cofounder, in 1971, of the new-music group Speculum Musicae. He was also a founding member, with pianist Peter Serkin, violinist Ida Kavafian, and clarinetist Richard Stoltzman, of the new-music group Tashi.

Amidst much hoopla—for were the young not finally having their day?—Sherry assumed the mantle of artistic director of the Society in 1989, and immediately began to make two kinds of major changes in the group's activities. He discharged several of the older members and replaced them with younger players; and he altered the balance of the programs in favor of more contemporary music—especially difficult contemporary music. The audience response was swift and unequivocal. The old crowds dwindled, and most surprisingly—at least to the ageless backers of a youth policy in music—the young failed to materialize.

So in 1991, Fred Sherry left. Once more the board cast about for a replacement, and this time the choice fell in 1992 on the clarinetist David Shifrin. Born in 1950, Shifrin was a veteran of the New York free-lance scene, at one time the solo clarinetist of the Los Angeles Chamber Symphony and then of the Y Chamber Symphony of New York. He later became director of Chamber Music Northwest, a post he now holds concurrently with the directorship of the Chamber Music Society. Shifrin's mandate was clear: bring back the audience. Toward this end he brought more—and more familiar—classical works to the regular subscription programs and drastically curtailed the number of new or modernist works. To compensate for the shortage of contemporary works on the Society's regular programs, he has now started a separate series devoted to new music.

On the evidence of the October "Live from Lincoln Center" telecast, the problems of the Chamber Music Society are still a long way from being solved. I shall reserve my

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comments on the television broadcast *qua* broadcast until later; at this point I wish to comment on the broadcast as a musical event. The program began with a short, specially commissioned Fanfare for eleven brass instruments by John Corigliano, who was the subject of much critical attention for his 1991 Metropolitan Opera commisssion, *The Ghosts of Versailles*. Whatever the merits of that work, his Fanfare turned out to be somber, trivial, and dull, completely lacking in the quality of joy one associates with the fanfare as a musical form; moreover, the performance, by the American Brass Quintet with added musicians, turned out to be something less than accurate and carefree.

The next work was the oft-played Debussy Rhapsody for Clarinet and Piano, performed by Shifrin himself with André Watts at the piano. When I say that the work is oft-played, I do not mean that it is found on many general concert programs but that it is one of the most important works written for solo clarinet. As such, it is performed in many, many clarinet recitals, and is the focus of every clarinetist's solo ambitions—or perhaps fantasies, rather like Walter Mitty's dream of hitting home runs.

On this occasion, the piece—which in any case is hardly imposing or dramatic (or, for that matter, rhapsodic)—was an unmitigated bore. Shifrin and Watts's performance appeared calculated to extract the maximum of refinement from the work's few notes. Watts indulged his habit of mouthing the notes as he played them, and seasoned this annoying practice with frequent beatific smiles. For his part, Shifrin seemed to be trying to show how each note could be "musically" inflected, and in the process he lost both the characteristic woody sound of the clarinet and the equally characteristic French sound of the composition. Indeed, their heavy-handed performance utterly shortchanged the work's real qualities: insouciance and charm.

The next work on the program was Mozart's great Quintet in A major K.581 for clarinet and strings. Like the Debussy, this masterpiece is another, but vastly greater, summit of the clarinet repertory. Written in 1789, the work is aptly described in Cobbett's still invaluable (1929, 2nd ed. 1963) *Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*:

> [The clarinet's] timbre naturally puts it outside the [string quartet] scheme, and Mozart therefore makes it the leader. The strings do not simply accompany . . . but play an obbligato while always accepting the precedence of the clarinet. The character of this instrument is reflected in the noble cantabile style and pure melodiousness of the whole.

Here is Mozart at his most gloriously serious, totally free of the *buffo* elements that mark so much of his compositional *oeuvre*. Perhaps the truest compliment that can be paid to the work is to say that it is great music played by the clarinet and strings, not great music for the clarinet and strings.

On the Lincoln Center telecast the players were violinists Joseph Silverstein and Ani Kavafian, violist Paul Neubauer, cellist Gary Hoffman, and, naturally, David Shifrin. This performance, to my taste, was marred by an appalling, saccharine sentimentality. Every note was manipulated, the outline of every phrase was underscored, and every cadence was rhythmically marked. The effect of all these spicings-up was neither interest nor variety, but rather a sameness, as if all music were feelings, and all feelings were equal. Gone was a sense of structure, space, and flow; instead the effect was dullness—compounded by irritation that the players were so concerned with injecting themselves, with so little point, into the music.

This irritation was increased by the fact that every interchange between the players was punctuated by knowing winks and pouts. Unfortunately it is just these kinds of distracting and superfluous facial expressions, like Watts's mouthings, that the television coverage of classical music seems most adept at catching. Under these conditions, the pictorial image *becomes* the music. It is as if such grimaces (the violinist Itzhak Perlman is a great offender in this regard) are not only necessary as a Baedeker guide to the

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music—outlining the unfamiliar terrain for the tourists—but also are the sole commodity that the telecast is selling. Poor Mozart, indeed.

The next, and final, work on the Society telecast was the extraordinary Schubert Trio in B flat major D.898 for piano, violin, and cello. The players were again Watts and Hoffman, with the collaboration of Kavafian. The Schubert, as is almost always the case with this composer, is a work of the most heart-wrenching melodies, long-lined and affecting. But in this work, there is something else perhaps not so frequent in Schubert: a mood, especially in the opening Allegro moderato, of passionate, large-scale nobility.

Accompanying these transcendent virtues, however, is a certain formal weakness, which is also frequent, alas, in Schubert's other instrumental works: a tendency to replace organic musical development—the growth and transformation of the musical elements—by mere repetition of whole blocks of the admittedly wonderful material. Thus the problem for the performers in playing the Trio, as it is in playing so much other Schubert, is to convey a sense of purpose and direction as each repetition occurs. The task of the players, in other words, is to substitute the vision of the performers—the knowledge of where the piece is going and why it is going there—for Schubert's missing architecture. Put still another way, Schubert must never languish; it must always move.

The Lincoln Center players quite failed to meet this challenge. Note to note, they played well. The performance did contain some, but fortunately not terribly much, of the cloying sweetness that had so disfigured the Mozart. All the melodies, all the supporting materials, were there—but to no purpose. The result was a half-hour bath in individual moments of musical expression, without the point that such expression must make if the music is to sustain interest. Put rather vulgarly, what was lacking was personality, the contribution that great executants bring to every note they play or sing. It is this expression of personality, not the perfect playing of notes, that constitutes the performer's true virtuosity. It is not accomplished by well-laid plans, careful rehearsal, or even by dutiful practicing. Rather, it is the natural expression of the performer's genius; it can no more be obscured by the great performer than a tall person can hide his height.

It is difficult for me to comment about the concert's intermission feature. The rehearsal excerpts of the Mozart were of little value to anyone except musicians, and even to them carried, I thought, surprisingly little insight either into the music or into the art of ensemble playing. As always when chamber music is being discussed, the emphasis was on how everyone was cooperating, submerging personality in the greater good of communitarian music making, and above all having a wonderful time doing so. The comments by the painter Helen Frankenthaler and the writers William Styron and Arthur Miller inevitably referred more to their own feelings and (in interesting detail) to their own work than to the music. Once again, as in the rehearsal excerpts, the emphasis was on how good chamber music makes one feel. I happily risk being called an old fogey for saying that the music is more important than anyone's feelings about it, and so be it.

I want to end by discussing the proper—or rather the ideal—place of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in our musical life. It is, I think, not enough for the Society to give polished and musically adequate performances of the great standard repertory. In this age of technical accuracy and facility, such performances are being given everywhere. New York is special; it remains, for better or worse, the leader of American cultural—and therefore of American musical—life. Much that is acceptable or even praiseworthy outside New York is humdrum here. What is needed in musical performance in New York is leadership.

Of course I realize just how difficult and rare it is to find masterly artists. Their supply

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is always limited, and it would seem today vanishingly small. But the fact that the supply is so restricted does not mean that it can be foregone: the indispensable function of masterly performances of music is to provide a context in which merely adequate performers can be heard to partake of the virtues of players much greater than themselves. That is why, in the absence of great performers and performances, old 78-RPM record tranfers are so vital, and that is why the responsibilities of musical direction are so great.

It seems to me that the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center has been particularly derelict in providing musical leadership. Its artistic direction, like so many of the Society's members, has come from resident members of the New York musical scene. They have lacked the vision and the mastery of great international players; no purpose at all has been served by bringing in celebrities from time to time for cameo appearances—celebrities who are themselves of questionable musical stature.

An attempt has been made to get around this lack by falling back upon a sentimental notion of chamber-music playing: according to this pabulum, in chamber music no one leads, no one stands out, no individual player is the cynosure. Nonsense. The greatest chamber-music performance is a manifestation of artistic personality, as is all musical performance, all musical composition, and indeed all art.

To speak of the recent reality rather than the halcyon past, there are still musicians —the pianist Alfred Brendel and the violinist Gidon Kremer come immediately to mind —who can provide leadership. It is artists of their caliber who should shower their talents on New York music. Are such artists being asked? Are there any in charge of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center who know the difference between adequacy and greatness? Or are we simply being sent the message that chamber music is too sociable to feature unique musical personalities? Whatever the answers to these questions, it is high time to start finding out.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

The life of Frederick Douglass *by James W. Tuttleton*
Alasdair MacIntyre *by Maurice Cowling*
Lucian Freud at the Met *by Jed Perl*
Walter de la Mare *by Michael Glover*
Ovid in today's English *by Sara Mack*
H. G. Wells revised *by Brooke Allen*
New poems *by John Haines & Robert Pack*

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Theater

Abes & angels

by Donald Lyons

Timon of Athens, one of the canon's orphans, recently got a solid production from the National Actors Theatre. Last year, the floundering company, brainchild of personality Tony Randall, brought in as artistic advisor Michael Langham, who had done stints as artistic director at the Stratford Festival in Ontario (1955–67) and at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis (1971–77). Indeed, Langham first directed *Timon* in Canada in 1963, when he commissioned the brooding Duke Ellington score used in this production; he tried it again in Canada in 1991, with Brian Bedford as Timon, as here. Thus the New York mounting is in the nature of a road show, especially considering Langham has brought his set designer and his sound designer with him. Langham, it should be remembered, lent competence and respectability to the Randall enterprise with last year's *Saint Joan*.

The "Athens" of the production is an Art Deco, de Chirico-esque Mayfair salon dominated by a sculpture of a toothbrush. It is the time of Noël Coward. A poetaster is telling fortunes. Jazz is tinkling. A party in progress is interrupted by police in vaguely fascistic uniforms come to arrest a noble for debt. Enter prodigal magnifico Timon, clad in a chic cream suit, who pays the debt, buys a painting, endows a servant with a dowry—in short, enacts numerous gestures of compulsive generosity. The action freezes at moments in order that the Cynic, a tuxedoed journalist, might flay hypocrisy. There ensues a heaped banquet, hosted by Timon and graced by a *danse du ventre* performed by three Josephine Baker types. Instant clouds gather, a steward informing Timon that his munificence has bankrupted him. He sends for help to the friends he has so lately feted. To a man, they refuse, one padding off huffily into a sauna with some muscular attendants. Timon, embittered, decides to throw a mock banquet, an anti-feast, at which, all in black with a white silk scarf, he serves "smoke and lukewarm water" to his faithless parasites. As a servant solemnly douses the candles in the wrecked banquet hall, the guests scatter in horror ("One day he gives us diamonds, next day stones") and Timon exiles himself in rags to a cave by the sea. Visited there by rebel general Alcibiades, carefully begrimed in designer guerrilla wear, Timon urges him, who has been, in the major subplot, warring upon the Athenian oligarchy, to extirpate life itself from Athens:

> Spare not the babe,
> Whose dimpled smiles from fools exhaust their mercy;
> Think it a bastard, whom the oracle
> Hath doubtfully pronounced thy throat shall cut,
> And mince it sans remorse.

These lurid imprecations constitute the strongest verse in the play. Even more superb in this vein is the advice Timon gives some thieves who have stumbled on him.

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You are, he assures them, not mortal anomalies but mere instances of the cosmic rhythms of robbery:

> The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
> Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,
> And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;
> The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
> The moon into salt tears. . . .

Bubbling with misanthropic bile, he scorns the kindnesses proffered by Athens's few good men, including the Cynic and the Rebel.

At this point, director Langham indulges in a bravura passage of flashing war-lights and exploding war-bangs and wafting war-smoke as Alcibiades enters the vanquished city on a crane. This particular theatrical trope, meant to dazzle spectators, by now merely irritates; for one thing, we've seen it as recently as in Richard Eyre's *Richard III* and Langham's own *Saint Joan*. It is especially gratuitous here, where the "war" is but a piece of narrative by-play. Alcibiades, victorious, reads the curse-filled epitaph of Timon but promises to treat Athens not in Timon's but in a clement spirit: "I will use the olive with my sword."

Timon is a pocket *Lear*, written apparently in the same years and amounting to a chamber variation on some themes of the grander play. Its didactic sketchiness, its stripped-down "parable" quality, actually fits it quite well for the energetically symbolic flashiness of a production like this. The style of presentation of this *Timon* and of last year's *Saint Joan* seems to belong to the Tyrone Guthrie School of Things. The degree of Langham's association with Guthrie is unknown to me, but his CV (he came to the Guthrie in Minneapolis in the year of Guthrie's death) certainly indicates a sympathy with the Master. What was Guthrie-ism? In 1955, Eric Bentley, reviewing three Guthrie productions on Broadway, spoke of "a verve and a shimmer" they shared. "All three are full of movement well conceived and well controlled, of groups well grouped, of masses well massed, of ingenuity, of surprising 'ideas.'" Bentley found this very homogeneity of style troubling, however, as it seemed to feed three quite different authors—Thornton Wilder, Christopher Marlowe, Pirandello—into the blender (my metaphor, not Bentley's) of Guthrie's flashy, *épatez-les-spectateurs* personality. To my sense, Langham's is a modified Guthrie-ism, of the Reformed Church. And in this day of wanton deconstruction, of Robert Wilson and JoAnne Akalaitis, the Langham style, mildly updating and Mayfairishly decorative, looks positively reactionary. The Langham style should not be mistaken for a genuine artistic vision, but in this landscape it'll do; it's a serviceable bomb shelter.

Its real triumphs are with the players. Langham gets good, moving work out of supporting actors like John Franklyn-Robbins as the Cynic and Michael Cumptsy as Alcibiades; he causes a level of sober competence to be manifested by virtually all speaking people. No hip-hop extras here. The jewel in this crown is Brian Bedford's Timon. Bedford is an experienced classical actor and an old collaborator of Langham's; the seasoning shows. His classicism as a performer achieves a balance between personality and impersonality. Eschewing the empty sing-song of some English acting, he projects the vicissitudes of an extravagant character with clarity and poignancy, and yet without seeming to be soliciting interest in his own, as it were private, personality, like some American actors. As the early Timon, Bedford—sunny, chipper, benevolent, optimistic—evokes (perhaps not deliberately) Ronald Reagan; as the fallen Timon, Bedford is not so much pathetic as ironic, witty. He shows a sensibility enlarged by disaster beyond that of the earlier Lord Bountiful. The simplistic diptych of the play—Panel A, *Prodigal*; Panel B, *Misanthrope*—is complicated by Bedford's intelligence, by the dark humor he finds in exile and squalor. Bedford's is a Lear I'd like to see.

"You're going to see *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*? My God, I was in that in high school," said a friend. "Oh yeah," I suggested, "do you want

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to see it again? A Proustian experience, perhaps? It's up at Lincoln Center and it lasts three hours and twenty minutes." No sale.

Abe Lincoln in Illinois is indeed the high-school snooze of all time. You keep feeling that you should be looking for a daughter or a son among the extras. It was written in the spring of 1939 by Robert E. Sherwood, the prose laureate of the New Deal (Archibald MacLeish doing the verse chore). Sherwood had started his playwriting career in 1926 by imitating Shaw in *Road to Rome*, with Hannibal replacing Shaw's Caesar. He was still aping Shaw in his most famous play of the 1930s, *Idiot's Delight*, a strained pacifist concoction that reads like *Heartbreak House* on a lot of gin. But by 1938 pacifism was in disrepute, and Sherwood turned his hand to a portrait of a reluctantly martial President of yesteryear. As very many commentators have noticed, Sherwood's Lincoln is not wholly unlike FDR.

The first act takes place in the 1830s: young rube Abe pores over grammar books, puts to rout some pro-Jackson louts about to disrupt a Fourth of July picnic, considers running for the State Assembly ("You're an honest man, Abe"), falls in love with Ann Rutledge and blasphemes when she dies. As staged by Gerald Gutierrez on the wide-open Vivian Beaumont space filled with mooning yokels and galumphing galoots, it feels like a musical (something on the order of *Oklahoma!* or *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*) where somebody forgot the music and just left us with a very pedestrian book. The second act is set in the 1840s: lawyer Abe quarrels with hothead partner Herndon about abolition (Abe's agin' it, though he's antislavery, for he's above all antiwar). A reluctant Abe is maneuvered into marriage by rich, ambitious, neurotic Mary Todd, whom Herndon cannot abide. The big set piece in this act, an act that has been dull even by Sherwoodian standards, is a dance where gangly Abe is forced to stand up by a determined Mary; again, we're at a musical manqué. In the third act, set in 1855–61, come the rhetorical set pieces: we get a long chunk of Lincoln–Douglas debating (Abe gets to say "house divided" and "half-slave, half-free") with the two actors just standing there and me dozing; we get the courtship of Abe by sleazy party politicos eager to use him ("He's a yokel-hoodwinker and vote-getter") as a Presidential candidate to front for their corrupt, capitalist interests; we spend election night at Abe's Springfield HQ ("New York has gone for us"); we hear a long farewell address delivered from a caboose platform as Abe leaves Illinois forever. Lincoln has, it is to be supposed, made up his mind by the end of the play that there are some things worth war, but even this, Sherwood's covert message, does not get clearly articulated here. For good Rooseveltians were not quite saying this aloud in the spring of 1939, and Sherwood was nothing if not opportunistic. He was to rewrite his next play, *There Shall Be No Night*, when its heroes, the Finnish people, became, after the Hitler–Stalin pact, suddenly politically incorrect.

Sherwood then, by obfuscated message and oafish dramaturgy, more or less muddles everything. He accepts the Herndon myth about Ann Rutledge, but then cannot write lyrical scenes of young love. (Thornton Wilder, in the preceding year's Pulitzer winner, *Our Town*, could at least do this.) He accepts Herndon's hostile take on Mary Todd, but cannot write anything more complex than a one-note shrew. (What, by the way, must Eleanor have thought of *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*?) Worst of all, he turns Lincoln, great man and great writer, complicated and melancholic, into a mere proto–New Dealer mouthing topical bromides ("The right to strike is as old as America. Why the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution itself were kinds of strikes"). And incidentally, the name of the party under whose banner Lincoln won the Presidency is never mentioned. Was he a Whig or what?

The sole stimulant in the long evening at Lincoln Center was the title performance by Sam Waterston. He was not afraid to act the fool, to lounge clumsily in courtship or lie down on the floor in the middle of a political argument. Tall as a tree and thin as a rail,

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with a voice like a squeaky pump, Waterston makes his physique count, using gangliness and coarseness as nurseries of a soul. He is particularly good in the early part before he has to recite Lincoln's Greatest Hits; he reminded me of Henry Fonda's ideal, all-elbows Lincoln in John Ford's wonderful 1939 film, *Young Mr. Lincoln* (so much better than the movie that was made of this play, starring the wooden Raymond Massey). In the later oratorical deserts, though, Waterston begins to sound like LBJ.

Sherwood won the Pulitzer for this, but trailed Lillian Hellman's *Little Foxes* in the voting for the New York Drama Critics Award. Neither won, for neither had the requisite three-quarters of the ballots. Sherwood, alas, was not capable even of the Hellman brand of rancorously efficient melodrama. Incidentally, if Lincoln Center is looking to resurrect lost plays about American presidents, I can recommend a truly stupefying soporific called *The Patriots* by Sidney Kingsley. It's about Jefferson and Hamilton, ends with Jefferson reciting his First Inaugural Address, and won the Drama Critics Award in the middle of the war, in 1943. And didn't Maxwell Anderson write something called *Valley Forge*?

And yet there is always worse. Sherwood's way with history looks Shakespearean next to that of Tony Kushner in *Angels in America, Part 2: Perestroika*. *Perestroika*, at the Walter Kerr Theatre, is a sequel to *Millennium Approaches*; it goes on with the lives of that play's characters. But it adds nothing of significance, rather exposing further the hollowness of the whole enterprise's pretensions. Why is it called *Perestroika*? That is not totally clear in the text that finally hit Broadway. There *are* vestigial remarks about Gorbachev (Kushner's spokesman calls him "the greatest political thinker since Lenin"—a betraying glimpse of Kushner's estimate not so much of Gorbachev but of Lenin) and Bolshevism (the play opens with "the oldest living Bolshevist" lamenting the replacement of Communism with cheeseburgers). There is the all-pervading denunciation of American anti-Communism as the greatest iniquity in the history of mankind. There is the apotheosis of Ethel Rosenberg, Stalin's spy, whose function here is to taunt a dying Roy Cohn ("You're dying more horribly than I did") and to speak of her hatred of Cohn as a burning star in heaven. Kushner, wholly behind Rosenberg, brings down an act curtain on a bare bulb that is supposed to be Ethel's holy hatred stellified. There is evidence in *Perestroika* that Kushner was earlier intending to make more of his vision of a "reformed" Bolshevism before history pulled the plug on that ludicrous notion. (In a sense, the only surprise is that Kushner should account himself a partisan of "reform" Bolshevism; he evinces no discomfort with the old version.)

But Kushner is a hater, not a visionary. His "visions" turn in the flick of a wisecrack into camp. That great descending angel turns out to be a sort of celestial vibrator, bestowing orgasms on a dying AIDS patient and on a Mormon matron. Old ladies *dig* orgasms in Kushnerland, just as they do in the TV-sitcom-land it so much resembles (v. "The Golden Girls"). The characters dream of a Heaven that will be just like San Francisco, with no race or preference prejudice, just "an undulant landscape over which the threat of catastrophe hovers, more beautiful because imperilled." This is Kushner reaching for the sublime, failing, and settling for the campy; it's the recurring systole and diastole of his rhetoric.

The actual plot is thin and predictable: the leftist intellectual and the (now openly gay) Mormon lawyer hook up only to split when the naggingly judgmental author-surrogate intellectual discovers that the lawyer not only knows Roy Cohn (variously dubbed "the polestar of human evil" and "the worst human who ever lived" and "the most evil, twisted bastard who ever snorted coke at Studio 54") but also works for a Republican (oh my God!) judge and has helped author opinions favoring industrial polluters over blinded children (!) and disenfranchising gay soldiers. Suitably shocked, shocked at these appalling discoveries about his lover,

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the leftist quotes Joseph Welch about "Have you no decency?" and throws the lawyer out of his bed and his life. I'd call it a happy day for the lawyer myself, but Kushner has no mercy on the Republican and exiles him from the Central Park finale, wherein the play's finer spirits (minus Ethel, for some reason) gather at the Bethesda Fountain and sloganize about gay rights. Also missing is the lawyer's wife, a character the author has been uncomfortable with throughout—on the one hand, she is unsympathetic *qua* impediment to hubby's gayness; on the other, she is sympathetic *qua* hater of her (Republican, remember) hubby. She is condemned to suffer—mainly, it seems, for being outside Kushner's range.

George C. Wolfe's snap-crackle-pop direction keeps the wisecracks coming over a long evening. Vivid, strenuous, exhausting are the fine performances of Stephen Spinella as the patient, Ron Leibman as Cohn, and, especially, David Marshall Grant as the lawyer.

Finally, the Manichean simplicities of Kushner's cosmology strike one as scarcely serious, as in fact infantile: Stalinists and Democrats and minorities (the play's representatively bitchy black nurse seems, however, patronizingly limited in range of voice and mind) and gays (all but one) are good; Republicans and conservatives and many straights are bad. It's like *1066 and All That* but without irony; it's really like a comic book. Kushner struggles to transcend what even he seems to feel are the constrictions of this worldview by preaching a reign of love and forgiveness, although I must say I found his use of "Ethel Rosenberg" to say *Kaddish* over "Roy Cohn" disgusting. But he soon slips back into his forte—venom. Here Ed Koch gets it. And the self-congratulatory Broadway audience laps it up. Kushner's art is the reverse of courageous; he throws raw meat to carnivores. He is the Andrew Dice Clay of the Left.

Part of the history of these plays has been their extraordinary reception by Frank Rich, late of the drama desk at *The New York Times*. His very last review was an unsurprising dithyramb for *Perestroika*, which was reported (in the *Times*) to have been rushed into being precisely to serve as the occasion for this valedictory piece. Rich called it "a true millennial work of art, uplifting, hugely comic, and pantheistically religious"—"pantheistically" being, evidently, the only correct way to be religious in the eyes of the *Times* these days. Beyond this even, he is quoted in the ads (perhaps from the radio) as exclaiming that "I felt that *Angels in America* is the most thrilling play of my adult lifetime." And the Kushner plays do indeed represent the (miraculous, one would say) fulfillment of the artistic agenda that Frank Rich had long been agitating for. The only question is when exactly Mr. Rich considers his "adult lifetime" to have begun. After *Gypsy*, I hope.

RECOMMENDED: *Four Dogs and a Bone*, a comedy by John Patrick Shanley, still best known as the writer of the movie *Moonstruck*, at the Manhattan Theatre Club. It is about the power struggles among a foursome of producer, writer, and two actresses during the making of a low-budget movie. The four collide and scheme in shifting alliances that resemble Racine in prettiness of patterning. It's like *Andromaque* meeting *Variety*. It is beautifully played by Tony Roberts as the cynically grouchy producer, by Polly Draper as a hard-boiled veteran actress, by Mary-Louise Parker as an ineptly intriguing debutante actress, and by Loren Dean as the idealistic screenwriter who is at first a hapless vector of others' desires and ambitions but who becomes a "player." The script's elegance and economy are echoed in Santo Loquasto's wittily minimalist sets (an office, a trailer, a bar), in Elsa Ward's costumes (in one scene, matching raincoats for the guys and matching skin-tight spandex for the gals), and in Shanley's own clear direction. This is the first work of Shanley's I've liked; it seems stripped, purged of his wonted introverted attitudinizings. Plus it is very funny, with language richer and wiser than the flashy verbal Ping-Pong of David Mamet's not dissimilar *Speed the Plow*.

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The media

Feeling sentimental

by James Bowman

Poor Ed Rollins! What an astonishing outpouring he provoked. All through November and well into December the media seemed unable to let his story go, even after the New Jersey Democrats had given up shaking the exiguous evidence like a terrier in the hope that it would yield a hint of illegality. Whether you believe Story No. 1, about his having paid off black ministers to dampen further their (and their congregations') already soggy enthusiasm for the reelection of Governor Jim Florio, or the subsequent denial in Story No. 2 that any such thing ever happened, your heart has to go out to him. It's not every day that you see a man in public life destroy his own career in a matter of seconds.

My first reaction to Story No. 1 was that it seemed rather bad form to be bragging about it, but that here was obviously heads-up campaigning. Just goes to show you why I am unlikely ever to be elected to anything. A professional like Rollins must have realized as soon as the words were out of his mouth that he had crossed an inviolable boundary between what even the frankest of political insiders may say and what everyone knows but no one must say. It is no secret that such skullduggery is a commonplace of urban politics—which is why Rollins expected the reporters to admire a particularly clever bit of it, a rare example of Republican walking-around money outbidding the Democratic variety. Yet the public admission of it provoked universal shock and outrage.

Actually, apart from those who feared damage to their own reputations—Mrs. Christine Todd Whitman, on whose behalf the supposed deed was done, and the black ministers, several of whom are bringing suit for slander—it was a peculiar sort of shock and outrage. For nearly all of the commentators were saying that everybody *else* was shocked by it but that they themselves were wise enough to know that Rollins's real sin was opening his big mouth. Even liberals who had most to gain from capitalizing on his *faux pas* could not with a straight face make the case for Republican perfidy. Richard Cohen, writing in *The Washington Post*, condemned the putative bribees, saying, "It's greed, not candor, that's a sin," while Mary McGrory—also in the *Post*—insisted that "Rollins's real offense was that he put himself ahead of his client."

If he did so it was not, as he himself alleged, an act of arrogance: "I committed the cardinal sin of believing my own press clippings," he wrote. Yet believing one's press clippings, at least to the extent that one is playing the same game as the press, is prudent and necessary for a man part of whose job it is to manipulate the media. Another *Post* writer, Meg Greenfield, carried Mary McGrory's observation a stage further and condemned upstart speechwriters and other back-room boys who are more and more crowding centerstage and pushing the politicians themselves into the background: "In fact," she wrote, "all manner of aides now

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give interviews grading the politician for whom they are purportedly working on how well he or she carries out instructions and also appropriating their triumphs and disowning their disasters."

Imagine! And why do they do this? Because the press itself demands it. The coverage last summer of the appointment of David Gergen as a senior adviser to the President shows just how far, since the triumph of "investigative journalism" after Watergate taught us to mistrust the political show itself, what goes on behind the scenes is the hot story. Nowadays, if a politician wants to hide something he needs to put it out in public, like the purloined letter, where it will be neglected by those who are only interested in the "real" story taking place backstage. In *Hell of a Ride*, his new book about the last days of the Bush administration, John Podhoretz tells of how Bush, the former CIA director, determined to stop the leaks that were so common in the Reagan White House and then discovered that the media would pay no attention even to major policy statements if they had not, as it seemed, precipitated out of some clandestine doings below stairs.

Thus to the press, the New Jersey election was as much a contest between Rollins and James Carville as it was between Mrs. Whitman and Governor Florio. "Unfortunately," he told lawyers for the New Jersey Democrats, "in this world of political consultants, I had a star quality, and I had people interested in meeting me as much as meeting her." It was in an attempt to burnish up his celebrity profile in contrast with that of Carville that Ed Rollins made his fatal error. And who could blame him? The "Ragin' Cajun" was the star of the new film by D. A. Pennebaker, just opening that week, called *The War Room*. It celebrates Carville's triumph—with some help from George Stephanopoulos and very little from Bill Clinton—in the 1992 presidential campaign. Moreover, Carville's impending nuptials with Mary Matalin, another new-minted star and talk-show hostess who started as George Bush's deputy campaign manager, have made him a celebrity second in magnitude only to the First Lady among those of the Clinton entourage. Miss Matalin is now, it is said, to take over the disgraced star's job as commentator on the "Today" show.

David Gergen must look to his laurels. And as for George Stephanopoulos, I would advise him to marry his movie-star girlfriend, Jennifer Grey, in the National Cathedral on a nationwide satellite link-up during prime time. His celebrity might not even then catch up to that of Carville, but at least the occasion would be a boon to the moribund acting career of Miss Grey. *Meanwhile, Ed Rollins is dishonored forever*, whether he bribed the black ministers or only bragged about it. This, it is true, is in the nature of a scandal, but our idea of what is dishonorable has changed.

It used to be thought, for instance, that allegations of extra-marital sexual conduct in a public figure were shameful, career-ending. J. Edgar Hoover largely built his own career on that assumption. But since the Gennifer Flowers affair, that has seemed no longer to be true. It used to be thought that in the case of a major screw-up by a cabinet officer, honor demanded his resignation. After the Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy said he himself would have resigned, if he had headed a parliamentary government. He may have said that only for effect, but the point is that some such gesture still had an effect. Yet when mistakes in judgment by Janet Reno led to the deaths of eighty people in Waco, Texas, not even the political opposition suggested that she resign. Hey, these things happen, the consensus of our public men and women seems to hold; there is no shame in it. What do we want to do? Make poor Janet feel worse than she already does?

The empire of self-esteem, however, is not complete. As Ed Rollins found out, there are still some things you can do which are shameful enough to get you excluded from public life. There is corruption and peculation, of course, though even that is an iffy business these days: investigations of serious

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charges of corruption against Ron Brown, the Secretary of Commerce, and Dan Rostenkowski, the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, seem so far not to have damaged appreciably the political career of either of them. But the charge of sexual harassment against Senator Robert Packwood has been devastating, and he is by general agreement only compounding his shame by clinging to office when there is a consensus in favor of his resignation.

Like Rollins—or like James Watt a decade ago—Packwood has discovered that the only sure way to disqualify your voice from being heard in the councils of the mighty is by offending the sensibilities of women or a protected minority. At first it seems odd that the truth-seeking media which is so eager to probe behind every appearance to get at what it imagines to be reality should be so readily fobbed off with euphemism, evasion, cant, and hypocrisy on the subjects of sex and race. But "reality" itself has become a cant word—presumably because, as T. S. Eliot said, humankind cannot bear very much of the thing itself.

Take, for example, the media cult of personal authenticity as it affects politics. It was this, as much as anything else, that brought about the election of Bill Clinton, who was much better at the politician's game of counterfeiting genuineness than George Bush was. Now it is making the members of his administration into "personalities" whose private doings—what's James *really* like, Miss Matalin?—are almost of as much interest as his. Clinton, too, must struggle to keep up. Luckily, no media outlet and few commentators or reporters these days are immune from the allure of celebrity worship or the cant that goes with it. Even such a normally shrewd and hard-headed observer of the political scene as Mary McGrory wrote not long after the Rollins affair about how, when the Brady bill passed, Bill Clinton (as he was careful to inform Mrs. Brady) had been chopping celery down at a homeless shelter in Anacostia, one of Washington's poorest and blackest neighborhoods:

> Nothing could express more clearly the difference between Bill Clinton and his predecessor. George Bush threatened to veto any crime bill that had the Brady bill, with its five-day waiting period, in it. . . . Bush never went to poor, battered Anacostia to chop celery, his wife by his side, for a Thanksgiving Day meal for the homeless. Barbara Bush did soup kitchens. Her spouse did not. He preached, but did not practice, volunteerism.

It is not possible that Mary McGrory does not know that Bill Clinton's chopping celery in Anacostia is "volunteerism" in the same way that wearing a red ribbon on your lapel is caring about AIDS. It is possible but unlikely that she does not know that the Brady bill will do little or nothing to prevent people in neighborhoods like Anacostia from shooting each other. If absolute prohibition and all the terrors of the law to enforce it have failed utterly to keep cocaine out of the ghetto—or even to make it scarce or expensive—how can she imagine that any legal measure, let alone one as trifling as a five-day waiting period, is going to keep guns out? But she professes to find hope of real change in both of these symbolic gestures.

Maybe that's because there is no other hope. The growing importance of gestural politics—whose ultimate perfection is, of course, politically correct speech and behavior—may be a sign not just of the corruption of our political debate but also of the exhaustion of our political intellectuals. They used to have lots of ideas for getting rid of crime and poverty and other social ills. But crime and poverty and other social ills have continued to get worse and worse. The only options left to them are sentimentalism or despair. Naturally, sentimentalism is a lot pleasanter.

Sentimentality is, among other things, the refuge of the emotionally isolated and powerless, which may be why it used to be associated with women—back in the days, that is, before feminism had struck off their shackles. Nowadays, of course, men and women are equally sentimental. This is be-

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cause, if the theory holds, they are equally powerless before the intractability of human nature and equally guilt-haunted about the failure of political idealism to do anything about it. Still, it may be as a relic of the old days that the king of sentimentalist cant is a gal. I mean, of course, Anna Quindlen, author of the "Public & Private" column on *The New York Times*'s op-ed page, whose effusions have recently been collected between hard covers as *Thinking Out Loud*.[1]

I would not bring up the matter of her sex but for the fact that she herself takes pride in belonging to "a world in which we can wear our gender on our sleeves, unabashedly," and that this means writing in an "altogether female" way—a way that has something to do with taking the traditional procedure of bringing "the mind but not the heart to the table of public discourse" and changing (reversing?) it. Note well: I traffic in no stereotypes. These are Miss Q's words. She herself it is who tells us, in what qualifies as the understatement of the decade, that "there are issues about which I not only think but also feel" and that it is the latter sort of issues that she, as an "altogether female" columnist, principally means to concern herself with.

Is it, I wonder, only coincidence that when Ed Rollins was grilled for seven hours by lawyers for the New Jersey Democrats, his most aggressive and relentless interrogator was Gerald Krovatin, Miss Quindlen's husband? It was almost as if the queen of cant had dispatched her own personal representative to enforce its authority in the Rollins case. But merely being mealy-mouthed about political realities can be left to underlings. To see canting at its most sublime, you must turn to Mr. Krovatin's female domestic companion.

Writing before American troops were sent to Somalia, for example, and comparing the U.S. government's attitudes toward that country with those toward Bosnia, she found that America did not "care"—by which she meant wringing its hands and manifesting other expressions of strong emotion in public—so much about the former as the latter. The suspicion must arise that this is yet another redundant example of American "racism."

Such "caring" is not expected to produce any practical results in a pair of situations for which she admits there are "no easy solutions." About Bosnia, she says,

> there is now sharply focused attention by the international community on what should be done and who should do it. Somalia deserves that same intense attention, from George Bush, Bill Clinton, the American people, and our allies abroad.

Ah, yes! All that sharply focused attention on what should be done shows that something *is* being done—as much as can be. As in the regular order of things sentimental, it is because there are no easy solutions that she is driven back on easy non-solutions. She has no clue as to what will benefit either the Bosnian or the Somalian people—apart from saying that food shipments are not enough—but she knows what will make liberal-minded people like her feel better and, as she has warned us, it is her own feelings that she is principally concerned with. "Surely," she says, "our attention span can encompass two mortal crises at once. Surely our empathy can transcend race." And equally surely, once our empathy has done so, neither the Bosnians nor the Somalians will be the least bit better off for it.

Even on a rare occasion where it appears that she has a mild attack of good taste, as when she reprimands Vice President Gore for introducing his son's serious accident into his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, it is for Gore's invasion of his son's privacy and not for his emotional exhibitionism. This is because she is herself the ultimate emotional exhibitionist. Where political passions have been raised her concern is neither to calm nor to

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1 *Thinking Out Loud: On the Personal, the Political, the Public and the Private*, by Anna Quindlen; Random House, 292 pages, $22.

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inflame them, neither to offer answers to hard questions nor to offer a memorable statement of the views of one side or the other. It is to let us know that she feels.

Her response to Anita Hill's testimony against Clarence Thomas, for example, was to say: "I knew what she had felt, what she was afraid she would feel if she testified, because I could feel it too. I felt soiled by the time they broke for lunch." Of course, she knows that Anita Hill was telling the truth, but she knows it not because of any ratiocination about the evidence visible to her readers but because it is the only "explanation for her story that seems sensible and logical to me." All those investigators involved in the case and the members of the United States Senate were wasting their time, it turns out. All they had to do was ring up and ask: "What seems sensible and logical to you, Anna?"

Leaf through the book and see how many objects of fine feeling she is able to find. Here is a surrogate mother who did not give up her baby according to her contract and now worries that her children will be rejected by those that they love and want to marry because of what she did. Anna worries too. There are the mother and husband of a woman soldier killed in Saudi Arabia. Anna grieves with them, though with the mental reservation that "the world would be better served if we all internalized those traits that have been seen, for whatever reason, as female" and there were, consequently, no more wars. The world Miss Quindlen lives in is obviously such a simple place that it is no wonder her brain is unemployed, apart from the task of finding out new and unfamiliar categories of victims (children whose mothers died from illegal abortions, people who have AIDS because their parents wouldn't allow their school to distribute condoms) to showcase her own boundless compassion and empathy.

Let us not break a butterfly on a wheel. When Miss Quindlen writes about the death and inevitable transmigration to heaven of her golden retriever, she may be imposing upon her audience's capacity for empathy beyond the powers of her art to win its indulgence ("He never bit anyone, which is more than you can say for most of us," is her enigmatical final line), but it is hard to imagine that she is a threat to the moral and political health of the republic. The point about Miss Quindlen is that she is a symptom rather than a cause of the wasting illness of sentimentality that afflicts our public life: she is a satellite state rather than the imperial homeland of the hegemony of cant.

She does not know this, any more than she knows that she cants. It is one of her endearing characteristics. A revealing passage in her book near the end bitterly complains of an editor who said he couldn't take her column because he already ran Ellen Goodman. "Not only was there a quota; there was a quota of one," she writes, as if it is obvious that the editor must be averse to having two women instead of two ideological soulmates on the same page. Ellen Goodman, by the way, has a new collection of columns out, too. There is obviously a market for the works of such Stakhanovite empathizers among the growing numbers of those who are, like them, so self-absorbed as to imagine that fine feelings are rare and precious rather than cheap and plentiful. And the rest of us will have to be increasingly careful about their precious feelings.

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Books

A talent to delight: Nancy Mitford in her letters

by Brooke Allen

Great gossip is as rare as great literature—rarer, indeed. As an art form it requires a fine balance between delicacy and vulgarity and a naked joy in the foibles of others which is not always given to even the most exquisite literary minds. Thus though the twentieth century has produced "great writers" aplenty, few of them can claim to be first-rate gossips; sometimes, however, this gift is possessed by so-called minor writers, such as Nancy Mitford, a truly original light novelist and a world-class practitioner of the art of tittle-tattle.

One of the most important requisites for fine gossip is a sympathetic recipient, and these Mitford possessed in spades. She numbered among her most frequent correspondents Raymond Mortimer, Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, Cecil Beaton, and Robert Byron, not to mention her famous and infamous sisters—Pamela, the poultry keeper; Diana, dedicated fascist and wife of Sir Oswald Mosley; Unity, a Nazi and friend of Hitler; Jessica, a Communist transplanted to America; and Deborah, the present Duchess of Devonshire. These were people whose high wit and relish for farce matched Nancy's own, and her correspondence—teasing, intimate, full of private jokes and public scandal—is one of the most enjoyable of the century. It has now been published, beautifully edited by her niece Charlotte Mosley, twenty years after the author's death.[1]

There are inevitably a few disappointments. Only one letter to Nancy's husband, Peter Rodd, has survived, and very few to her publisher, Hamish Hamilton. There is almost no correspondence with her father, the second Lord Redesdale, the most attractive and eccentric member of her family and the inspiration for her greatest comic creation, the ferocious Uncle Matthew of *The Pursuit of Love*. But fortunately most of Nancy's friends treasured her letters, and some of the correspondences are little masterpieces in their own right: that with Evelyn Waugh merits separate publication in a book of its own.

These letters are long overdue. The 1975 memoir of Mitford by Harold Acton, himself a famous gossip, was disappointing: a model of opaque discretion, it was the work of a friend rather than a biographer. It stressed what we already knew—that Mitford was beautiful, gifted, amusing, and aristocratic—while skating over unhappier topics. Though Acton allowed that her wit could be mordant, frequently cruel, he chose not to examine the bitterness that prompted it.

Other books have catered to the British public's seemingly insatiable obsession with all things Mitford: Jessica Mitford's first volume of autobiography, *Hons and Rebels* (1960), Diana Mosley's memoirs, *A Life of Contrasts* (1977), David Pryce-Jones's *Unity*

1 *Love from Nancy: The Letters of Nancy Mitford*, edited by Charlotte Mosley; Houghton Mifflin, 538 pages, $35.

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Mitford (1976), and *The House of Mitford* (1984) by Jonathan and Catherine Guinness, Diana's son and granddaughter, have all kept the pot boiling. In these books Nancy herself appears somewhat obliquely, often attacking with caustic barbs but keeping her deeper feelings—how unlike the rest of her family!—under wraps. It was not until 1985 that Selina Hastings, in her excellent *Nancy Mitford: A Biography*, revealed behind Mitford's high spirits and sparkling self-presentation a sadder, more pathetic, and unexpectedly valiant figure. The letters—a selection of five hundred out of the surviving eight thousand—help complete the picture.

The Mitford childhood has been amply recorded in the above-mentioned books, and immortalized by Nancy herself in *The Pursuit of Love*. In its literary version it is idyllic; in reality, we find, Nancy was a lonely and unhappy child, ignored by her mother, snubbed even by a much-loved nanny. The vague, distant Aunt Sadie of the novel is portrayed as a benign figure: her model, Nancy's mother, was rather less so. "I had the greatest possible respect for her; I liked her company; but I never loved her, for the evident reason that she never loved me. I was never hugged & kissed by her as a small child—indeed I saw very little of her." As an adult Nancy claimed to have few feelings even for her father; but it is impossible to see the portrait of Uncle Matthew as anything but affectionate, and the truth is probably that Nancy cultivated her indifference to her parents in response to a certain coolness she felt from them. Her letter to Jessica after their father's funeral describes the futile sadness of incomplete relationships.

> I've just got back from England. Three funeral services—such tear jerkers . . . with the old hymns (Holy Holy Holy) & the awful words, I was in *fountains each time*. Then the ashes were done up in the sort of parcel *he* used to bring back from London, rich thick brown paper & incredibly neat knots & [Pamela] & I & Aunt Iris took it down to Burford & it was buried at Swinbrook. Alas one's life.

The funniness of *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate* masks the desperation with which Nancy fought her cloistered life at home. She was the eldest child, and her parents seemed not to realize that the Victorian age had passed and the 1920s were in full swing. She defied their vigilance by joining forces with a group of rather younger men from Oxford, friends of her brother, almost all homosexual: Mark Ogilvie-Grant, Robert Byron, Brian Howard, Harold Acton. The contrast between these colorful aesthetes and Nancy's philistine family was titillating, and she saw only their attractions. Almost inconceivably innocent, she fell in love with the most outrageous member of the entire group, Hamish St. Clair-Erskine. Amoral, flamboyant, a heavy drinker, the narcissistic Hamish was incapable of returning any affection, particularly that of a woman. (There is much of Hamish in the character of Albert Memorial Gates in Nancy's first novel, *Highland Fling*.) Nancy tried to laugh off his bad behavior. "The other day H. said to me in tones of the deepest satisfaction 'you haven't known a single happy moment since we met have you.' Very true as a matter of fact; what he would really like would be for me to die & a few others & then he'd be able to say 'I bring death on all who love me.'" In vain her friends warned her against him, including Evelyn Waugh, who was to remain perhaps her best friend until his death in 1966. "I'm making such a lot of money with articles," she wrote in 1930—"£22 since Christmas & more owing to me so I'm saving it up to be married but Evelyn says don't save it, dress better & catch a better man. Evelyn is always so full of sound common sense. The family have read *Vile Bodies* & I'm not allowed to know him, so right I think."

This doomed love set the pattern for Nancy's entire life. The saddest paradox in the story of this contradictory woman was the fact that while she glorified romantic love above all other emotions, she was able to give her own love only to men who were patently incapable of returning it. There

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were two great loves in her life—three if one counts her husband—and she could hardly have found three unworthier objects of the unswerving devotion it was in her nature to lavish. Her misery over the affair with Hamish, and later over the more serious one with Gaston Palewski, was real enough; but her knee-jerk habit was always to make a joke of her unhappiness. After a temporary split with Hamish:

> I tried to commit suicide by gas, it is a lovely sensation just like taking anaesthetic so I shan't be sorry any more for schoolmistresses who are found dead in that way, but just in the middle I thought that Romie who I was staying with might have a miscarriage which would be disappointing for her so I got back to bed & was sick. Then next day I thought it would be silly because as we love each other so much everything will probably be all right in the end.

The affair ended definitively in 1933. Nancy was approaching thirty, eager for marriage and independence, and when Peter Rodd proposed, almost jokingly, soon after Hamish jilted her, she took him up on it. Rodd was rather a well-known character in his day—he was the inspiration for Waugh's Basil Seal—but though his exploits were amusing from a distance, he was an appalling bore in person, posing as an expert on every conceivable subject. (His friend Edward Stanley parodied him: "I know, I know, I *am* a displaced person/painter/journalist/financier/poet/Italian pimp.") In spite of his undoubted gifts, "his only genuine success," Peter Quennell said, "was having married Nancy Mitford." There are aspects of Peter, or Prod as he was usually called, in both of Linda's husbands in *The Pursuit of Love*. Like Tony Kroesig, he was boring and had a pompous family; like Christian Talbot, he was indifferent to his wife's unhappiness but selfless when it came to the suffering masses. Like Christian, too, Peter took his wife to Perpignan to help refugees from the Spanish Civil War.

In Perpignan, Nancy unexpectedly discovered that she had a political conscience. She had always been understandably wary of political enthusiasm, seeing the terrible rifts it had caused in her own family. The teenaged Jessica's doctrinaire Communism she considered something of a joke, but Unity and Diana's fascism was more sinister, and her mother's enthusiasm for Hitler was to bring an end to the Redesdales' marriage. In 1935 Nancy had mocked both Unity and Sir Oswald Mosley in *Wigs on the Green*, and though she instantly regretted having hurt her sister ("Oh dear I wish I had called it mine un comf now because uncomf is what I feel when ever I think about it"), in early days she seldom lost an opportunity to poke fun at fascism:

> I hear that [Unity] & Diana are going to stand outside the Polls next polling day & twist people's arms to prevent their voting, so I have invented (& patented at Gamages) a sham arm which can be screwed on & which makes a noise like Hitler making a speech when twisted so that, mesmerised they will drop it & automatically spring to salute.

But Nancy ceased to find anything to joke about after her experience with the refugees. "If you could have a look," she wrote to her mother, "as I have, at some of the less agreeable results of fascism in a country I think you would be less anxious for the swastika to become a flag on which the sun never sets. . . . Personally I would join hands with the devil himself to stop any further extension of the disease." However, Nancy had a more conciliatory character than her sisters, and managed to remain on good terms with all of her family—though, bizarrely, she volunteered to the authorities her opinion that Diana, as a dangerous person, should join her husband in prison for the duration of the war. The disasters of the thirties turned her into a lifelong socialist, and she proudly called herself pink, an adjective Diana qualified as "synthetic cochineal."

Nancy held several jobs during the war, as an ambulance driver, canteen assistant, and First Aid worker ("Well my job is writing on the foreheads of dead & dying in indelible

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pencil. *What* I write I haven't yet discovered. . . . Meanwhile I sit twiddling my indelible pencil & *aching* for a forehead to write on"). From 1942 she worked as an assistant in Heywood Hill's bookshop, which she turned into a salon for the most interesting people in wartime London, but which Americans, because of her rudeness to them, called "The Ministry of Fear." A brief affair with an officer in the Free French Forces caused an ectopic pregnancy which left her, tragically, unable to have children.

It was during the war that Nancy's life changed course dramatically. She fell in love with Gaston Palewski, then head of de Gaulle's *cabinet* in exile. Her passion would endure for the rest of her life. He was forever her *beau ideal*, and inspired all the romantic characters of her postwar books: Fabrice de Sauveterre in *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*, Charles-Edouard de Valhubert in *The Blessing*, even the character of Louis XIV in her historical work *The Sun King*. As for Palewski, or "The Colonel" as she called him, he was amused by her, enjoyed her company, but was never in love. Aware of this, she tried hard to to make the best of it ("I suppose the next best thing to having one's sentiments returned is to have them *appreciés*"). She moved to Paris to be near the Colonel, and from that moment forth France came to represent to her warmth, romance, and beauty, England ugliness, cold, and her unhappy youth. "Oh my passion for the French. I see all through rose coloured spectacles!"

Her one idea was to be available for Palewski during the rare moments he could spare from his political obligations and his myriad amours. Prod, long unfaithful to Nancy himself, now got short shrift. Her infatuation with him had been brief; she soon saw how he bored her friends, "like Raymond Mortimer & Willie Maugham who like the sound of their own voices punctuated with my giggle, but who hate being told about the origin of toll-gates by Rodd." Once the Colonel entered her life he always took priority.

> I am really fond of Peter you know but the whole thing is complicated, & the person I live for is the Col & if he can't run in & out of my house at all times I know in the end he will feel lonely & his thoughts will turn to marriage. Also I *can't* see what poor Pete gets out of it as I'm not really very nice to him—surely he'd much better marry again & produce an heir to the lands & titles.

Whatever the miseries of Nancy's affair with Palewski, there is no doubt that with his appearance the quality of her writing reached its height. Largely inspired by her love for him, she wrote *The Pursuit of Love* with unprecedented ease in 1945, following it with *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949) and *The Blessing* (1951). These are widely agreed to be her best novels, far surpassing the four extremely lightweight prewar books. During these years she also wrote her very popular historical works, *Madame de Pompadour* (1954), *Voltaire in Love* (1957), *The Sun King* (1966), and *Frederick the Great* (1970).

For those who love Nancy Mitford's books, the most interesting of the letters will be those discussing their gestation, particularly the correspondence with Waugh, her chief professional advisor. She quizzed him at length on the plot and technique of the superbly funny *Love in a Cold Climate*, though she followed his advice only selectively, since she was nothing if not realistic about her own gifts.

> What I wonder is whether I can (am capable of) doing better. You speak of Henry James but he was a *man* of intellect, you must remember that I am an *uneducated woman* (viz punctuation). . . . You see I'm afraid that what you really criticize are my own inherent limitations. . . . I can't do more really than skate over surfaces, for one thing I am rather insensitive as you know, & for another *not* very *clever*.

She enjoyed baiting Waugh—"I do think Catholic writers have that advantage, the story is always there to hand, will he won't he will he won't he save his soul? Now don't be cross"—and he her: "The punctuation is

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pitiable but it never becomes unintelligible so I just shouldn't try. It is clearly not your subject—like theology." He was also helpful when it came to her finding a voice and a readership, a critical problem with the historical works. "To be enjoyed by [Diana Cooper] and Pam Berry," Waugh wrote about *Madame de Pompadour*; "Write for the sort of reader who knows Louis XV furniture when she sees it but thinks Louis XV was the son of Louis XIV and had his head cut off."

In 1967 Nancy moved from Paris to Versailles, and in 1968 she contracted a rare form of Hodgkin's disease that was rooted in the spine. She spent the last years of her life in indescribable pain, a pain intensified by the long-dreaded marriage of the Colonel. Her bravery, her continued wit and high spirits as she slowly died, can only be described as heroic. There were a few bright spots: she was made Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur in 1972, "the only honour I ever coveted," and shortly thereafter awarded a CBE. "A book I've got called *Titles* . . . says never on an envelope & of course never on a card. In other words ONE knows & nobody else."

The funniness of the letters, right up to the end, is wonderful; it is also sad, for it shows the extent to which Nancy had trained herself to hide pain and depression. The Colonel was bored by sadness, and Nancy had for years only managed to keep his friendship by amusing him. She did so, valiantly, until the day of her death. Hence the paradox of these wonderful letters: full of jokes, they describe, finally, a painful life.

A prodigy of parody

Max Beerbohm A Christmas Garland.
Illustrations by the author.
Introduction by N. John Hall.
Yale University Press, 197 pages, $25

reviewed by John Gross

Parody is a delicate art, but it has a way of falling into the hands of coarse practitioners. Think, for example, of the ghastly burlesque of *The Waste Land* perpetrated in the 1950s by the Cambridge don who wrote under the pen-name of "Myra Buttle." How can anyone have taken pleasure in such stuff (except on the principle that any stick to beat the dog would do)? It is enough to make you despair of the genre as a whole. But then think instead of Henry Reed's brilliant parody of *Four Quartets*, *Chard Whitlow* (much admired by Eliot himself, incidentally), and a sense of balance is restored. There are happy exceptions—parodies that are worthy of their subjects, that yield as much or more on a third or fourth reading as they do on a first; and the happiest of all are the seventeen sketches that make up *A Christmas Garland*.

Beerbohm's book had its origins in 1896, when he was twenty-four. (An unusually mature twenty-four, needless to say: he was even younger when Wilde observed that the gods had bestowed on him the gift of perpetual old age.) In the Christmas supplement of the *Saturday Review* for that year, he published five parodies of contemporary authors, ranging from Ouida to himself, all on a Christmassy theme. Ten years later he brought out a similar but generally superior batch in the same magazine. Finally, in 1912, came *A Christmas Garland* itself: seven parodies from the 1906 group, nine new ones, and an improved version of his parody of George Meredith—the lone survivor from the 1896 contingent.

In spite of the praise it regularly receives, the book has been out of print for a long time, and Yale has performed a noble deed in bringing out a new edition. It is a handsome piece of work, too, with the same typeface as the original, the same lavish margins, the same chunky format, even the same gilt-embossed binding. In addition, by way of a bonus, there are a sheaf of related caricatures—some of them a bit muddy (as is often the way with Beerbohm reproductions) but most of them delicious, and all of them worth having. Above all, there is a lengthy essay by the editor, N. John Hall, in which he considers the parodies one by

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one and supplies a good deal of background information. This is particularly useful in the case of the forgotten men in the collection—the novelist Maurice Hewlett, the essayists A. C. Benson and G. S. Street: you may feel you already know them simply on the basis of Beerbohm's skits, but it doesn't hurt to be possessed of a few of the actual facts as well. And while Beerbohm usually set out to parody the distilled essence of his subjects, rather than specific works, he did sometimes have such works in mind, and it helps to know which. Only a specialist, for instance, would be likely to recognize that "The Feast," the story by "J*s*ph C*nr*d" in *A Christmas Garland*, is partly modeled on Conrad's early tale "The Lagoon."

Given the general excellence of the edition, the one undoubted gap is hard to account for. Nowhere is there any indication, not even in the four-page bibliography, that in his old age (his real, non-perpetual old age) Beerbohm brought out a second edition of *A Christmas Garland*, containing an additional parody—only one, but one of his best, a chapter from an imaginary novel by Maurice Baring entitled *All Roads*—. Even if the decision to reproduce the 1912 edition in facsimile means that it wasn't possible to include this piece in the main text, one might reasonably have hoped that it would be printed as an appendix.

There was a case, too, though a more debatable one, for devoting another appendix to "The Guerdon," the parody of Henry James which Beerbohm wrote in 1916, on the occasion of James being awarded the Order of Merit. It is as dazzling a performance as the James parody in *A Christmas Garland*, "The Mote in the Middle Distance"; the two belong naturally together. And it would have been nice, if only for the sake of completeness, to have found space for the uncollected 1896 parodies, or at least for some representative extracts.

Still, these are relatively minor grumbles. The important thing is that the collection is now available again, and that its virtues still shine as brightly as ever.

It would be as foolish to attempt to draw up rules about what constitutes a good parody as it would be to attempt to draw up rules about what constitutes a good joke. Beerbohm owes much of his superiority to other parodists to qualities which resist analysis—to greater precision, finer inspiration, keener wit. But his work also exemplifies two sound general principles. First, true parody, at any but the most rudimentary level, mimics substance no less than style; if it fastens on mannerisms, it also embraces choice of subject matter and habits of mind. Second, a successful parody must be interesting or satisfying on its own account. If it is a story, we want to know what happens next; if it is an essay, we must be caught up in its argument. Either way, we must feel that the imagined author—G. K. Ch*st*rt*n or Arn*ld B*nn*tt or G**rge B*rn*rd Sh*w—has taken as much (or as little) trouble to shape his material as the real Chesterton or Bennett or Shaw would have done.

Style is what hits you first, even so. Before you have worked out exactly what Beerbohm's victims are saying, you are likely to find yourself engrossed by the way they are saying it, by their verbal tics and tricks. Belloc: "The man, as men will, went in." Shaw: "This—I say it with no deference at all—is bosh." George Moore, explaining how Dickens "disengages the erotic motive" in *The Pickwick Papers*. H. G. Wells, in pamphleteering mode: "The joyous hum and clang of labour will never cease in the municipal workshop . . ." Each and every one of them, perfect. Yet even at this micro-level, Beerbohm goes beyond outward impersonation. He enters deep into the spirit of his authors; he seems to be not so much parodying them as pushing them in the direction of self-parody. The scrap of verse from *Police Station Ditties* which R*dy*rd K*pl*ng uses as the epigraph for his short story, for instance—"Then it's collar 'im tight,/ In the name o' the Lawd!/. . ./ An' it's trunch, trunch, truncheon does the trick!" You feel it is the kind of thing that might actually have floated into Kipling's mind—only he would have suppressed it. Or take M*r*d*th's

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elaborate circumlocution for farmland—"leagues of Hodge-trod arable or pastoral." It's a succulent phrase: you can see what's absurd about it, but you are also enabled to understand the pleasure which the real Meredith took in rolling such phrases round his tongue.

The organizing principle of *A Christmas Garland* is of course Christmas itself (an almost wholly secular Christmas, one might add). In a sense, the book is a set of exercises, seventeen styles applied to the same theme. The device has often been used, mostly mechanically, though from time to time with genuine inspiration—by Chesterton in his variations on "Old King Cole," for example. For Beerbohm, it serves principally as a means of demonstrating that whatever the subject, ruling passions and individual temperaments are bound to reassert themselves. Before you know where you are, Conrad is peeling away layer after layer of illusion, Galsworthy is agonizing (in gentlemanly fashion) over the dilemmas of a well-heeled humanitarian, James is preparing his characters for *il gran rifiuto*—in this case (they are children) for magnificently renouncing the opportunity to take a peek at their Christmas stockings. George Moore launches into a reverie about Balzac and Tintoretto (who always makes him think of Turgenev) and Renoir and Palestrina and narrow flanks and sloping thighs. Frank Harris, taking it for granted that the Man Shakespeare had an unutterable loathing for Christmas, proves to his own satisfaction that it must have been because Christmas Day was Anne Hathaway's birthday.

And the pieces mysteriously "work," as something other than burlesques—as not-quite burlesques, at any rate. The Meredithean heroine Euphemia Clashthought ("pagan young womanhood, six foot of it") plies her fiancé with port in order to avoid going to church, and the effect is not so much that of a satire on Meredith as that of a slightly different kind of comic novel. The characters in the Galsworthy skit go through absurd moral hoops, yet the scene rises before you as clearly and solidly as anything in Galsworthy himself. When you come to the end of Maurice Baring's Chapter V, you feel a pang of disappointment at the realization that there isn't going to be a Chapter VI. You even allow yourself to be carried along, once you are absolved from having to take them seriously, by the gentle flow of A. C. Benson's platitudes. (Did Beerbohm know, or guess, that Benson was desperately depressive and that from his own point of view his writing was literally anodyne—a much-needed sedative?)

The most purely amusing piece in the book is the fictitious memoir by Edmund Gosse, "A Recollection." (Beerbohm said that it was the only thing apart from "'Savonarola' Brown" that he ever wrote "with joy—easily," and one can well believe it.) The young Gosse, taking "a brief and undeserved vacation" in Venice, calls on one of his idols, Robert Browning, who is installed in a handsome palazzo. Later that day he encounters another of his idols, Ibsen, in the Piazza San Marco. Browning, though he has never heard of "this brother poet and dramatist," insists that Gosse bring him round for Christmas lunch, and the stage is set for an exquisite little comic drama. A three-sided drama: on the one hand the hearty optimist and poet of married love, on the other hand the glowering pessimist and playwright of marital disaster, and hovering in between Gosse the literary man, professionally committed to appreciating them both.

The comedy in the Arnold Bennett parody, "Scruts," is even more preposterous. "Scruts" are bits of defective pottery; folk in Bennett's Five Towns have a custom—a custom invented by Max Beerbohm—of putting them into Christmas puddings, and if you were to paraphrase what happens to them in the course of the story it would sound like something out of Monty Python. But Beerbohm's purpose goes beyond farce. As N. John Hall says, he also manages to capture Bennett's feeling for strong-minded, stoical women, and the characteristic flavor of his best work—"pessimistic, but with a

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kind of resignation not altogether sad." The urge to poke fun is tempered by a certain amount of sympathy and respect.

Only two of the parodies could in fact be considered wholly hostile, the Kipling and the Shaw. In the case of Kipling, Beerbohm concentrates almost exclusively on the brutality: a policeman catches Santa Claus climbing out of a chimney and frog-marches him to the station, egged on by the gleeful Kiplingesque narrator. As criticism, this is hardly the whole story—Kipling had access to areas of feeling that Beerbohm didn't begin to touch; but it is true as far as it goes, and it provides the basis for a splendid self-contained lampoon, one of the best pieces in the book. The Shaw skit, a preface to "Snt George: A Christmas Play," is much weaker. Beerbohm has no trouble reproducing Shaw's knockdown manner and his athletic turns of phrase, but he is so intent on pillorying his vanity, pseudo-modesty, and mock-ironic boastfulness that he has almost no time for anything else.

There will always be readers for whom the whole business of parody, wherever the parodist's sympathy lie, is negative and parasitic. I think that they are wrong; but after rereading *A Christmas Garland* at one go—which N. John Hall says you shouldn't—I must admit to feeling a certain unease. Beerbohm did after all have a streak of unyielding philistinism, and high among his talents was a talent to belittle. The mood soon passes; but there are times, reading him, when you find yourself craving a good cold draught of seriousness.

On settled reflection, only two of the parodies strike me as troublesome, the Hardy and the Conrad. The Hardy is a sequel to *The Dynasts*—the cosmic Spirits revisit the earth; the Conrad is a macabre jungle yarn. Both are extremely skillful, as you would expect; both focus on a narrow set of idiosyncrasies—and their narrowness seems to me more objectionable than that of the Kipling sketch, where the aggression is out in the open. It's not that you are left feeling that Hardy and Conrad are poor writers; you just aren't given any real indication that they might be great ones.

The other parodies still stand, however: miniature works of art in their own right, most of them flawless. And in the case of Hardy, at least, Beerbohm made amends, in a later and much better parody, "A Luncheon." It was inspired by an account of the Prince of Wales—the future Edward VIII and eventual Duke of Windsor—being entertained by Hardy during a visit to Dorchester in 1923, and it is perhaps unfamiliar enough to be worth quoting:

> Lift latch, step in, be welcome, Sir,
> Albeit to see you I'm unglad
> And your face is fraught with a deathly shyness
> Bleaching what pink it may have had.
> Come in, come in, Your Royal Highness.
>
> Beautiful weather?—Sir, that's true,
> Though the farmers are casting rueful looks
> At tilth's and pasture's dearth of spryness—
> Yes, Sir, I've written several books—
> A little more chicken, Your Royal Highness?
>
> Lift latch, step out, your car is there,
> To bear you far from this antient vale.
> We are both of us aged by our strange brief nighness
> But each of us lives to tell the tale.
> Farewell, farewell, Your Royal Highness.

Text's jest-book

Christopher Ricks
Beckett's Dying Words:
The Clarendon Lectures, 1990.
Oxford University Press, 218 pages, $25

reviewed by John Simon

Whether or not it features seven (or more) types of ambiguity, Christopher Ricks's *Beckett's Dying Words* displays at least three types of opacity: the opacity that comes from extreme compression, the opacity that

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derives from constant allusion and word play, and the opacity caused by a basic indifference to the reader's comfort. I am a great admirer of Professor Ricks's wit, erudition, and ability to make everything connect—whether by conjunction or mere disjunctive juxtaposition, to say as it were, "How revealingly different this is from that"—but I do not think that a commentary should be harder going than what it comments on. Especially if the text is Beckett's *oeuvre*, which needs no further obscurity, however ingenious, shed upon it.

The very title offers fair warning. Beckett's "dying words" can be (a) his last words, his legacy to the world; (b) his philosophy of death-in-life, of welcoming death as a relief from living; and (c) his cadences, the dying fall of his prose, the slow diminuendo that leads via a "syntax of weakness" almost imperceptibly to cessation.

In the first section, "Death," Ricks examines the way the death wish permeates Beckett's writing. In the second, "Words That Went Dead," Ricks considers modes of abstraction, the use of clichés, the way clichés can be resurrected into a "zombie life," and the obituary as an art form (connection with Beckett dubious). This last subsection begins: "Are obituaries still viable? Well, viduity still exists." Yes, viduity still exists, but nowadays it is known as widowhood. Ricks quotes from a London *Times* obituary the statement "his . . . good manners and approachability set him apart," and notes "How discreetly [it] passes on the halitosis of bonhomie." I wonder what the listeners (these texts were originally delivered as the Clarendon Lectures at Oxford) made of that? And did they take "passes on" to mean *imparts* or *abstains from*?

The third section, "Languages, Both Dead and Living," concerns Beckett's use of English, French, Latin, Gaelic (scarcely at all), archaism, words that have two antithetical or near-antithetical meanings (e.g., *cleave*, *all over*, *quite*), and words that sound like antonyms but are in fact synonyms (*to best* and *to worst*, *roundly* and *squarely*, in their figurative sense). The fourth section, "The Irish Bull," deals with a type of utterance that seems superficially logical but is really self-contradictory, though it may then prove wise in its very unwisdom. Such bulls can be blunders, like Dan Quayle's: "The evolution towards democracy in China is irreversible—but that could change"; or they can be deliberate, as when Richard Steele explained why bulls were so frequent in Ireland as to be commonly known as Irish bulls: "It is the effect of climate, sir; if an Englishman were born in Ireland, he would make as many." Ricks examines these bulls from all possible angles, often leaving Beckett far behind. This examination is so entertaining that one gets the feeling that *Beckett's Dying Words* is best when the words discussed are not Beckett's at all.

Who would expect to find in a book about Beckett the closing paragraph of John Gielgud's obituary for Elisabeth Bergner: "An amazingly original and enigmatic personality of enormous fascination, I am very proud to have known her"? It exhibits, according to Ricks, "the tempting self-attention which a dangling participle may effect." But is poor syntax by an actor, even a distinguished one, necessarily more than an innocent lapse? And where in this is what Ricks also perceives, "the gratuitous anonymous aggression, the knackering of a dead horse"? Delightful to read the aperçu of a colleague of Ricks's about his English Department, "There are plenty of vacancies, but they're all filled." What bearing, though, has this on Beckett? Nice, but no less irrelevant, to be treated to Geoffrey Madan's definition of a *Times* obituary: "Emotion anticipated in tranquillity." Alas, Professor Ricks feels obliged to top this with "Madan distilled his obituary-on-phial."

Still, like everything Ricks has written, *Beckett's Dying Words* is something to reckon with. First, it is a rare (in both senses) example of close reading in Anglo-American criticism. The anglophone version of the French *explication de texte*, "close reading" was promulgated here by I. A. Richards (like Ricks, an Englishman), and flourished

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under the New Critics. When their vogue died, it was resuscitated by Reuben Brower, Richard Poirier, and the Amherst school, later transplanted to Harvard. When that, too, died, it was dug up—and simultaneously reburied—by the Yale structuralists and deconstructionists, a brood at whom Ricks takes many welcome potshots. His own form of close reading is, however, often so close as to become clotted, or perhaps merely close in two of that word's other meanings: secretive and stuffy.

The method can be illustrated with Ricks's discussion of "To have vagitated and not be bloody well able to rattle," from *Malone Dies*. Its tones and overtones are examined in both the English and French versions of the text, with much made of the echo of *vagina* in *vagitate*, although there is no etymological kinship; we learn that this formulation is "exasperatedly sleek with the blood of birth." But when one edition of the novel changes *vagitated* to *mewled*, Ricks comments, "What 'mewl' does, scarcely a word, more like a sound-effect (but then an infant can't fant), is not only transport us to second childhood, but colour the rattle. . . . Even without 'mewl' ('the Infant,/ Mewling') this abbreviation of the death-rattle to the rattle might make us hear the baby's rattle." I find some of this hard to swallow, and the *fant* downright indigestible.

Or take this passage: "There follow two laconic parenthetical clichés: 'launched it clumsily but with force among the testicles (to call a spade a spade) of the adversary (impossible to miss them).' The first cliché here is openly (though parenthetically) a specious disclaimer, since 'testicles' is exactly *not* calling a spade a spade on such an occasion. The constable, not to put too fine a point on it, gets kicked in the balls. But then the cliché is brought to a mortal liveliness [!] by the sudden flashing of *spade*, a eunuch (odd that *spayed* takes in the female eunuch). [Or that Ricks takes in Germaine Greer.] . . . If you kick a man with enough force, you will be able to call a spade a spade." Doesn't this sound a bit far-fetched, a trifle forced?

The need to play with words—and, presumably, to prove that one is at least as clever as Beckett—often becomes suffocating. Consider this, about the French and English versions of *Molloy*: "Nevertheless, it would be simple-minded to deny, all the same [redundant after *nevertheless*, but what won't one do for a play on words?], that the two works called *Molloy* are, when considered under one aspect, not at all the same. The antithesis of translation and creation is both indispensable and inadequate, and the same goes for texture and context in the very writing. In all of these cases, we shall need, not to settle for, but not to be unsettled by, the conviction that the terms antithesized are distinguishable even though they are not distinct." This writing is distinctly distinguished.

Such compulsive teasing of words, rather more for sound than for meaning, runs through the book. We are continually hectored by quibbles such as "Beckett's fictions bodied, and not just bodied forth," "his tautly tautological poem," "a casualness as well as a casualty," "the [French] language which was not natural to him but which came naturally to him," "death sets the term as well as the terms," "this, in its flare and flair," "to have its coronary-corollary," "a diffident confidence," "this comic masterpiece or mistresspiece," "this properly taken improper advantage," "physical and physiqueal," "a prim primer," "'emitted' is decorously embarrassing, bent to vent the pent," "the penal pen," "Beckett's English, formal-sounding and formality-sounding," "The oddly bodily," "*a posteriori* and preposterously," and so on and on.

What, for example, does this mean: "The word 'athwart,' while making perfect sense, can be felt to run athwart its own solicitations here"? And what of "Wary of rigor vitae, Beckett has a soft spot for rigor mortis—and a healthy respect for vigor mortis"? Why write *misadvantage* for *disadvantage*? Why tell us, after countless other examples of Irish bulls, the one given the author when a haggard new parent: "Sleep every waking moment"? Funny, yes; relevant, no. And why mix rhetoric with biology, as in "the

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bull, instead of being an ironic catachresis, becomes a sarcastic catabolism"?

On and on this stuff goes, sometimes amusing, often wearisome. "This victory is both pyrrhic and pyrrhonist" (why not *pyrrhonic*, while we're at it?) and "These unmassive missives moved me." We are told that it is "astonishing what *and* can be up to when it gets down to it," and this, quoting from a letter of Beckett's to Ricks: "'Odd,' he wrote, evenly." What, exactly, does that *evenly* mean: neatly, with equanimity, or on a straight line?

Don't misunderstand: it is always better to have wit than to lack it, and wit in a scholar is a blessing indeed. But even as part of art is to hide it, part of wit is to wear it lightly. This Professor Ricks does not do, any more than he lightens the reader's burden. Take "by something which itself partakes of the oxymoron, the antithetical sense [of a word that has two contradictory meanings] is at once fully an oxymoron and yet not one at all (rather as *rime riche* may be poverty-stricken)." Note the strategy of making an illustrative analogy anything but a clarification. *Rime riche* poverty-stricken? Of course, rich and poor under the same roof is piquant, but what does it mean? In French, *rime riche* is highly desirable; in English, it is considered grating. Then what is this "poverty-stricken"? And what of that *may be*? Is it poverty-stricken sometimes, and sometimes not? When yes, when not? And bear in mind that these essays were originally delivered as lectures; hard as they are on the page, they must have been infinitely harder when merely heard.

Similarly, whenever Ricks quotes a text that Beckett published both in French and in English (as was frequently the case), we get it in both languages, along with useful indications of which came first, and speculations about the meaning of whatever divergence exists. This is fascinating for a reader, but must have been hell for the listeners, unless Oxford audiences are more bilingual than most. Even then, they must have been sorely tried by, say, the glossing of "Connaître le bonheur" with "Decorous but open, the French word *connaître* carnally acknowledges the invisible stitches." Yes, *connaître* may be split into *con* (cunt) and *naître* (to be born), though the word derives simply from the Latin *cognoscere*, which is neither physiological nor obscene. Yet even if one wants to call attention to this pseudo-etymology, why put it so abstrusely: "carnally acknowledges its invisible stitches"?

This said, there are happier things to report as well. Professor Ricks's mind is as well stocked as any now pursuing literary scholarship, with a range that is wonderfully wide. How many people could annotate *Molloy*'s "I was staggering with weakness" with "'Staggering' has its comic possibilities; the BBC once praised Nureyev as 'a staggering dancer'"? How nice to have Beckett's use of the verb *coffin* glossed with, among other things, "The author of *Death's Jest-Book* relished it," followed immediately by an allusive reference to *The King and I*? And there are times when Ricks's wit is so disarming that all is forgiven. Thus, commenting on the passage in *Murphy* about the raising of Lazarus, "perhaps the one occasion on which the Messiah had overstepped the mark," Ricks notes that "this particular intervention by the Messiah had indeed overstepped the Mark; it is not to be found in his gospel, but in that of St. John."

Ricks certainly traces the death-wish—and death-in-life-wish—in Beckett exhaustively, adverting also to some of its literary ancestry in Tennyson, Hardy, Housman, and Edward Thomas. One of the book's strengths is the attention it pays to Beckett's poetry and to the early and very late or posthumous prose, all much less known than the major novels and the plays. In fact, the book accosts the well-known plays comparatively infrequently: there are only three references to *Endgame*, and two to *Godot*—itself a kind of snobbery, but useful to the less than total Beckettian in search of broadening. And it is smart of Ricks to rely on the OED; repeatedly he assesses Beckett's usage of a word by studying how it fits in with the various definitions and usages provided by the dic-

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tionary. From these confrontations, Ricks gleans rewarding insights. He is also commendably familiar with the secondary literature, and quotes from it to good or, if it is stupid, to devastating effect.

There are splendid passages in *Beckett's Dying Words*. For example:

> Art is—among so much else—a mediation between life and death, a means by which both individually and collectively human beings can be brought to contemplate with honesty the thought of their no longer being. Art can live on after the life that gave it existence. It is natural for artists, and lovers of art, to entertain the thought that art is immortal; natural, too, for us to find strange but true comfort in the counter-acknowledgement that, in the long run, art is no more immortal than we are. To Swinburne's claim that 'All men born are mortal but not man', Tennyson retorted within a longer perspective: 'Man is as mortal as men'. Art is as mortal as men, but it is a stay, though not triumphantly against mortality, yet enduringly against confusion or consternation about mortality.

This is as finely conceived and elegantly written as can be. But there are not enough passages of this caliber. Instead, there is the fanatical chase after various forms of irony, negation, ambiguity, ambivalence, indirection, and unassertiveness that collectively compose or decompose (a turn of phrase I get from Ricks) Beckett's escape from life.

The trouble with all this textual explication is that it does not allow of a larger picture, a way of apprehending the shapes of Beckett's works and work. That may not have been Ricks's aim (a pity), or he may feel that the minute examination of certain words, phrases, constructions is tantamount to a definition of Beckett's art. It may indeed be that, pursued in a slightly different way, the method might have yielded a clearer profile, both of its subject and of itself. As it is, I find in the book some trenchantly relevant and many more dazzlingly irrelevant aperçus, and much that remains too elusive, too opaque, too dead.

Beckett, I have read, liked to go to the Crazy Horse Saloon, one of the classiest Paris strip joints, and sit at a good table close to the stage with his back to the strippers. That, to me, characterizes his attitude to life: to be there in Paris at its most bustling, but with his back turned to it. So, too, Beckett's words, living or dying—or, better, living *and* dying—turn their backs on sensory experience only to grasp its meaning more intensely by intuition.

Lives of the artists

Lee Hall Elaine and Bill: Portrait of a Marriage. The Lives of Willem and Elaine de Kooning. HarperCollins, 340 pages, $25

James E. B. Breslin Mark Rothko: A Biography. University of Chicago Press, 700 pages, $39.95

reviewed by Eric Gibson

Here's a pretty sentence: "For many of the artists who took the bait dangled before them, the young and available women became prizes to be won in the game of cock and chicks."

It's a line from Lee Hall's *Elaine and Bill: Portrait of a Marriage*, a biography of Willem and Elaine de Kooning, and it all too perfectly captures the spirit of the book: it's petty, pernicious, and crude. Hall's is one of a pair of artists' lives to have been published this season, the other one—a much better book—being James E. B. Breslin's *Mark Rothko*.

Hall's book is forgettable, but it is not uninstructive, for when one compares it to Breslin's, it brings into focus certain questions about the craft of biography, especially biographies of artists: What can or should we expect of them? What standards should we apply? Breslin's and Hall's books stand as examples, respectively, of how and how not to write the lives of artists.

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Breslin's is a straightforward study of his subject's life. Hall's book, as the subtitle implies, concentrates on the relationship between the de Koonings. Both books share, of course, Abstract Expressionist painters as their subjects, and each one tells a more or less tragic story. Breslin, who teaches English at the University of California, Berkeley, traces Rothko's life from his family's emigration from Russia to Portland, Oregon, when he was ten. He details Rothko's education, his apprenticeship as an artist, his failed first marriage, his professional success, his failed second marriage, and his suicide in 1970. Rothko's feelings of insecurity and inner conflict—and the way those feelings were only exacerbated by success—form the leitmotif of Breslin's study. It is a grim tale. By the end of the book, Rothko's suicide seems almost inevitable.

The de Koonings' story is no more cheerful: considerably less so, in fact. Willem de Kooning and Elaine Fried, both painters, meet in 1936 as Bill is on his way up, the acknowledged center of the downtown avant-garde. Powerfully attracted to each other, they first live together, then marry. The marriage becomes troubled almost at once, and fourteen years later they separate, by which time Bill has had a child, Lisa, out of wedlock. Wealthy and successful, he continues to paint as before, while Elaine, who never attained anything like the same level of recognition, has to scrounge around for teaching jobs just to make ends meet. She is too proud to ask her estranged husband for money. In 1976, nineteen years after separating, the two reconcile. Elaine takes over the running of Bill's affairs, since by this time the seventy-two-year-old artist is becoming too addled and disorganized to realize that he is being taken advantage of by hordes of hangers-on and other opportunists. There is a halcyon, thirteen-year autumn relationship which ends when Elaine dies of lung cancer in 1989, leaving Bill behind, his brain so ravaged by Alzheimer's that he needs round-the-clock supervision and probably doesn't even know that he has become a widower.

Those are the lives' similarities. In method and approach to their telling, however, there could hardly be a greater difference. For one thing, Breslin's biography is a scholarly effort, the product of comprehensive reading and much original research. Among other things, he troubled to burrow into school records and traveled to Rothko's home town of Dvinsk, Russia. Hall—a past president of the Rhode Island School of Design and author of a book about the art dealer Betty Parsons—has based her book primarily on tape recordings and notes of conversations with her friend Elaine de Kooning, supplemented by interviews with Grace Hartigan and others who had firsthand knowledge of the two artists. Throughout, *Elaine and Bill* is a gossipy, through-the-keyhole account.

Hall has essentially two points to make. First, that Elaine and Willem de Kooning were a pair of drunken philanderers who were also artists; second, that Elaine apparently used her considerable feminine wiles to advance the career of her lover-husband—an effort without which, Hall claims, the history of modern American art would have been very different.

Thus a veritable Noah's Ark of critics (Harold Rosenberg and Thomas B. Hess among them), dealers, and others share a bed with Elaine, all so that Bill would be reviewed in the pages of *Art News* (which he was) and have his pictures sell. An unidentified artist is quoted as saying that Elaine "used sex and allure and charm to control an empire. It was Elaine, not Bill, who first started sleeping around after their marriage." Hall's reliance on such anonymous sources—particularly for the book's more damaging assertions—makes her the Woodward and Bernstein of contemporary biography. And, as with the Watergate authors, this practice raises serious questions about motivation and credibility.

When she is not portraying the de Koonings as overheated stoats, Hall makes them look like George and Martha in Albee's *Virginia Woolf*, endlessly bickering and goading each other into a fury. "They got into an awful spiral of competition," she quotes an-

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other unnamed source as saying. "She would do something awful; he would do something more awful. He would be inconsiderate and mean; she would be spiteful and cruel."

And just to make sure Elaine de Kooning doesn't shuffle off this mortal coil with any vestige of dignity, Hall manages to depict her as an avaricious Svengali once she had reconciled with Bill. Yet another unnamed source is allowed to get in a dig: "With Bill needing her and in no position to disagree with her directions about his life, she had complete control," he says. "Control over him. Control over his work. Control over his career and control over all of that money. And Elaine may have liked that kind of power as much as she liked that kind of money."

Wonderful person, Lee Hall. With friends like that, as the saying goes . . . How wise of Lisa de Kooning to have refused her cooperation.

Now some, or even all, of the dirt that Hall shovels up may be true. Everybody knows that the Cedar Tavern was the main watering hole of the Abstract Expressionist artists, and that casual sex wasn't invented by the counterculture in the 1960s. Elaine herself had to dry out late in life. (One of the book's few compassionate moments is Elaine's account of realizing she had to stop drinking after hearing a tape recording of her inebriated self. Like all drunks, she had always thought she became wittier and more insightful under the influence.) And her last years were largely devoted to getting Bill onto the wagon with her.

The question is, though, do we need to know any of this, or at least in such detail? What does it add to our understanding of the de Koonings, Abstract Expressionism, or human beings and the way they interact? Nothing. And it raises another issue: even allowing for our contemporary tabloid culture's lurid fascination with human frailty, is there no norm of decency that governs the examination of lives, especially when the subjects are in no position to respond? Lee Hall apparently doesn't think so.

Hall isn't even very good at this debased form of biographical exposé. Circumscribed as her intellectual ambitions are, they still require a coherent narrative. But Hall can't always seem to get her facts straight. She has Willem de Kooning constructing two different bedrooms in the same loft at the time of his marriage to Elaine. On page 34 it is "a special bedroom for them to share, with built-in storage spaces and a platform bed. Placing the room in the center of the loft, he provided separate working areas on opposite ends of the gigantic space for himself and for Elaine." Eleven pages later Hall quotes photographer Rudolph Burckhardt describing the bedroom de Kooning built *for Elaine only* with "'the well-planned quality of a ship's interior. Then he painted it pink.'"

Hall isn't really interested in biography—the complex layers that make up a life, and the even more complex ones that go into a relationship between two people. She is a sensationalist at heart, a writer obsessed with peccadilloes and pathologies to a point where they trivialize and obscure everything else. She's in love with the PR of Abstract Expressionism—the swashbuckling, drinking, fornicating artists—so much so that parts of the book read like plot synopses of a Judith Krantz novel. "From the beginning," she writes at the outset of her book,

> each possessed the vital ingredients for a vocation in art—a monolithic belief in the absolute supremacy of art and the kind of faith that produces zealots, saints, heroes, and lunatics. They also possessed an abundance of talent, intelligence, sexual allure, appetite for life, and energy to spend on art and contrary riskiness and adventuring. They were ambitious, they were competitive—and neither was psychologically constituted to be an also-ran or to play it safe.

It's hard to imagine what Lee Hall thought she was achieving in this book. One thing she certainly *has* done is to trivialize and demean her subjects, not just as individuals but also as painters. The message that this books sends—that Willem was a

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kind of dumb adjunct of Elaine's will, a Potemkin Village construct—is a philistine one. It's another way of saying there's really nothing to modern art, that it's all public-relations sleight-of-hand.

James Breslin's book on Mark Rothko, on the other hand, is the real thing, a biography worthy of the name. He does what biographers are supposed to do. He documents what Rothko did, providing the reader with a coherent chain of events, places, encounters, and actions that structured and conditioned his subject's life. And he probes and dissects, looking for one or more common denominators that will explain individual actions and the overall trajectory of the life under review.

Breslin's is a synthetic approach: life is used to explain art and vice versa. And, unlike many writers on art who have no training in the subject, his readings of Rothko's paintings are, despite being occasionally over-literal, remarkably competent. How different this is from Lee Hall's book, in which there is almost no serious discussion of painting, only the most rudimentary forms of description.

Breslin presents Rothko as deeply insecure about nearly everything, not least his abilities as an artist, an affliction whose roots he locates in his father's emigration to the U.S., the family's uprooting itself to follow him a few years later, and his father's sudden death soon after Rothko, his mother, and his siblings had joined him in Portland. "At ten, transplanted to a wholly new environment, Rothko had been left in the lurch—financially and emotionally," Breslin writes.

Compounding the trouble, according to Breslin, was Rothko's inclination to assuage his insecurity by too readily trusting untrustworthy people, among them Bernard Reis, his business and legal advisor, and Frank Lloyd, founder of the Marlborough Gallery. Breslin also makes the point that Rothko was torn between a desire for critical and worldly success and a morbid fear that such rewards would compromise his artistic integrity. An extraordinary vignette in the book has Rothko, having already worked for two years on a series of murals for the Four Seasons restaurant, angrily abrogating the commission and returning the advance once he has visited the restaurant and seen its upscale clientele.

According to Breslin, success brought with it a further risk in Rothko's eyes: exposure as a fraud. After taking visible pleasure in the opening-night festivities on the occasion of his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961, he showed up at a friend's apartment at five o'clock in the morning, distraught, he explained, because "everyone can see what a fraud I am." In the light of that sort of conflict, success was the last thing Rothko needed. Yet he got it.

This sort of thing is, to say the least, ripe for the kind of "Geraldo" treatment Lee Hall gives the de Koonings in her book. Yet Breslin avoids it throughout, and this may have cost him something with the public. Writing in *The New York Review of Books*, the art critic and art historian Jack Flam criticized Breslin for being long on research and short on insight, and for not making a case for Rothko's importance as a painter. But I think anyone inclined to read this biography will already have an adequate grasp of Rothko's achievement. Besides, as Lee Hall's book shows, a little understatement with a subject like this is all to the good.

Something else Breslin does well in his book is communicate the importance of the pivotal moments and encounters in Rothko's life, without which no biography is complete. Speaking of Rothko's response to Max Weber, Breslin writes:

> the forty-four-year-old Weber—a heroic figure victimized for his artistic transgressions—was the kind of authority with whom the twenty-two-year-old Rothko *could* connect. More than that, Weber had been born in Bialystok, Russia, of orthodox Jewish parents, had emigrated to Brooklyn at the age of ten, lived there "in near poverty conditions," entered the first grade knowing no English and then, after skipping several grades, completed high school at sixteen.

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In other words, Weber was virtually a mirror of Rothko himself. There is a similarly insightful section on Milton Avery's impact on the young Rothko.

It's ironic that Breslin's should be the successful book and Hall's the disaster. Hall, after all, is an art-world insider while Breslin is a professor of English. But then, biography is as much a matter of temperament as of knowledge. Each author had as raw material the cliché of the tragic artist. Hall stuck with the cliché, inflated it, then milked it for all it's worth. Breslin turned two dimensions into three. In doing so, he's made the tragedy of his subject's life the more poignant.

Does God have a future?

Karen Armstrong A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Knopf, 460 pages, $27.50

reviewed by Marc M. Arkin

In the interests of full disclosure, I should say that any book whose first chapter prominently features the words "holistic" and "empowerment" has a heavy burden to surmount with this reviewer. This is particularly the case when the subject under discussion is Semitic religion before the eighth century B.C. Karen Armstrong's new book, *A History of God*, both incurs and utterly fails to overcome that burden.

Subtitled "The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam," *A History of God* is billed as a comparative study of how adherents of these religions have described their experience of the divine over the course of history. It seeks to accomplish this end largely through seriatim sketches of the writings of major religious figures, grouped under headings such as "The God of the Philosophers," "The God of the Mystics," "The Death of God?," and concluding with "Does God Have a Future?" Unsurprisingly, in this age of historicism, Armstrong's thesis is that each generation remakes its vision of the deity in its own image so that God will "work for them" and that a fresh reworking is due. *A History of God* does not quite live up to its racy title; but it is, quite simply, one of the most obnoxious books to cross my desk in a very long time.

I am put in mind of a recent conversation with one of my academic colleagues. In response to persistent questioning about the value theory underlying his work, he doggedly repeated, "In the postmodern age, now that God is dead, pragmatism is all we have." In a country in which the percentage of church membership is higher than it was in the eighteenth century, and in a decade that has witnessed resurgent fundamentalism throughout the Islamic world and increasing church attendance in both Eastern and Western Europe, this struck me as odd, even granting the ten-year time lag between events in the real world and their reception in the academy. Indeed, to paraphrase Mark Twain, "news of God's death is vastly overstated." The fact that Karen Armstrong's book has attained "best seller" status in England is yet another indication of the public's hunger for the things of religion. Unfortunately, if the laity must make do with such thin gruel as this—with the endorsement of persons of the cloth—religion, if not God, might as well be dead.

Compressing four thousand years of history into four hundred pages, *A History of God* has the feel of one of those much-satirized package tours of Europe: everything flashes past the window at breakneck speed and the visitor returns home having seen everything and learned nothing. The book is long on detail and short on any themes but the most heavy-handed. Mystics are good, rationalists are bad. Non-Western cultures are good, Western culture is bad. Compassion and justice are good, "establishments" are not. I suppose it proves that Manicheanism, like God, has a certain staying power.

In fact, reading this book induces a disorienting nostalgia, as if, by some cruel trick,

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the 1960s haven't really ended after all. Take Armstrong's reading of the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt. The passage bears quoting at length. Armstrong tells us that

> some modern scholars suggest that the Exodus story is a mythical rendering of a successful peasants' revolt against the suzerainty of Egypt and its allies in Canaan. This would have been an extremely rare occurrence at the time and would have made an indelible impression on everybody involved. It would have been an extraordinary experience of the empowerment of the oppressed against the powerful and the mighty . . . The God who may have inspired the first successful peasants' uprising in history is a God of revolution.

(Have I mentioned that there is an arresting deadpan wackiness to this book that would be funny if it weren't meant to be taken so seriously?)

Not contented with transforming Moses into the Lenin of his day and the Israelites into the vanguard of the proletariat, Armstrong announces that the prophets Amos, Isaiah—despite his possible status as "a member of the ruling class"—and Muhammad were all protosocialists: They used "the idea of God to . . . ends that were quite close to the Marxist ideal." On the other hand, Armstrong muses, "[s]trange as it may seem, the idea of 'God,' like the other great religious insights of the period, developed in a market economy in a spirit of aggressive capitalism." It appears that Armstrong, a former Roman Catholic nun who has transformed herself into what the jacket blurb describes as "one of the foremost British commentators on religious figures," has missed the developments of the last few years: while God most assuredly is not dead, Marxism is very much so indeed.

God himself appears in two forms in Armstrong's work. He is either personal and transcendent, in which case He can "encourage perpetual immaturity," or He is immanent and inherent, in which case He is an "essentially subjective and personal enlightenment" and, accordingly, a very good thing. The transcendent God, when He isn't fomenting revolution, is subject to abuse by mankind. A transcendent God can, in no special order, be "manipulated to shore up the beleaguered self," be made into a "Republican or a socialist, a racist or a revolutionary according to our personal views," be "an idol made in our own image and easily turned into a celestial Super Ego," or become a "grave liability . . . a mere idol carved in our own image, a projection of our own limited needs, fears and desires."

Milton, in particular, fares badly in the God sweepstakes. Like many another academic manqué, Armstrong seems to have taken a visceral dislike to *Paradise Lost*. There, she opines,

> God comes across as callous, self-righteous and entirely lacking in the compassion that his religion was supposed to inspire. Forcing God to speak and think like one of us in this way shows the inadequacies of such an anthropomorphic and personalistic conception of the divine. There are too many contradictions for such a God to be either coherent or worthy of veneration.

When Lucifer made much the same point with far more eloquence, Milton had a ready response: "Oh argument blasphemous, false and proud."

Given this buildup, Armstrong's discussion of the God of the mystical tradition is rather disappointing; she doesn't have all that much to say once she is done ringing changes on the word "immanence." To be fair, this may be because the essential insight of mysticism is that God is an experience beyond words, straining even the power of metaphor. Armstrong does, however, claim some rather unlikely exponents of a subjective deity, including St. Augustine, for whom—his *Confessions* notwithstanding—she contends, "God . . . was not an objective reality but a spiritual presence in the complex depths of the self." Indeed, she argues that, while "only a few people are capable of true mysticism, . . . in all three faiths (with

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the exception of Western Christianity) it was the God experienced by the mystics which eventually became normative among the faithful, until relatively recently." This assertion seems a bit extravagant, considering that we are also told that the claims of Sufi mystics "would certainly arouse the ire of the establishment," an ire formally expressed through the crucifixion of at least one Sufi adept for blasphemy. It also dismisses the important strain of experiential piety that runs through European Christianity in favor of a rather restricted view of mysticism.

Genuine mystics, as Armstrong relates, insist that God is "not an-Other Being." In fact He "does not really exist and it is better to call him Nothing." This understanding has the great virtue of being "in tune with the atheistic mood of our secular society." Its only drawback is that the mystical God displays a rather inconsiderate reticence; He can only be approached through long training and "considerable investment of time," which appears not to be consonant with the ethos of our age. But as Armstrong explains, "since hallucination is often a pathological state, considerable skill and mental balance is required to handle the symbols that emerge."

While Armstrong sets forth a tripartite project of studying the "God-religions" (the phrase is hers), her sympathies are altogether clear—and they do not lie with what she calls the "western" tradition, a synonym for Latin Christianity. Presumably this is because both Judaism and Islam (as well as the Eastern rite) have presented a more fertile ground for mysticism. She also stoutly asserts that Islam has a greater ethic of tolerance toward other religions than does Christianity. And, indeed, the acceptance of Jews by the Ottoman Empire, especially after the expulsion from Spain, is well known. Armstrong fails to observe, however, that this tolerance extended only to Christians and Jews, and even then Islamic governments imposed special disabilities on these "peoples of the book." Not content to leave well enough alone, Armstrong further pronounces that "the intolerance that many people condemn in Islam today does not always spring from a rival vision of God but from quite another source. Muslims are intolerant of injustice, whether this is committed by rulers of their own—like Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran—or by powerful western countries."

Armstrong saves her strongest distaste for Western Christianity. In the West, God is a "strain." Its incarnational theology is "difficult"; "it has been all too easy to make this 'God' a projection, which has recently become discredited." In other words, Western Christianity is founded on the concept of a transcendent God.

Thus, Armstrong characterizes the entire Reformation as an effort to allay the sexual and social anxieties that were expressed in the witchcraft persecutions of the fifteenth century. Luther is dismissed as a "rabid anti-Semite, a misogynist, . . . convulsed with a loathing and horror of sexuality, and [the belief that] all rebellious peasants should be killed." His vision of a "wrathful God had filled him with personal rage" that "did great harm to the Reformation." Calvin fares better, apparently because "Calvinism is more easily discarded by its adherents than Roman Catholicism" and because Calvin was "not particularly interested in dogma"—a proposition that would surely be met with surprise by readers of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, a worthy document that is nothing if not an exercise in dogmatics.

Armstrong's penchant for time travel also leads to some remarkably loopy comparisons and idiosyncratic transitions. For example, Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150–215) is described as enunciating a rule of life that was "remarkably similar to the detailed rules of conduct prescribed by the Rabbis except that it had more in common with the Stoic ideal." The German philosopher Hegel fares even worse. His concept of the world spirit was "in some respects strikingly similar to the Kabbalah," the great Jewish mystical work, a resemblance that Armstrong terms "ironic" because Hegel regarded Judaism as an "ignoble religion which was responsible for the primitive conception of God that had

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perpetrated great wrong." In fact, Hegel rates a scant two paragraphs of attention, less than either the three pages given the Baal Shem Tov, the eighteenth-century founder of Hasidism, or the four pages devoted to Sabbatai Ha Zevi, the false messiah of seventeenth-century Judaism. In one particularly stunning transition, Armstrong jumps from the Islamic–Jewish dialogue of the eleventh and twelfth centuries to the crusades to the reintroduction of Greek thought into the West by Duns Scotus Erigena in three essentially unconnected paragraphs.

All this is bad enough, but the book is riddled throughout with errors and misstatements both great and small. The latter range from the misspelling of American historian Alan Heimert's name to the misreading of the Old Testament passage in which Elijah challenges the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18). Other statements are simply misleading. Although she remarks that the "Midianite theory"—the God of Exodus was originally a deity of the people of Midian among whom Moses lived in exile—is usually discredited by scholars, Armstrong nevertheless proceeds to build upon the theory as if it were fact. Similarly, she argues that the deity she styles the Israelite war god, Adonai Sabaoth (roughly translated as the Lord of Hosts), only wins the affections of his people from the Canaanite fertility god Baal when he shows that He controls rain as well as victory. Yet, in what some believe to be the oldest verses in the Bible, the war song of the Judge Deborah (Judges 5:4-5), the God of the Israelites is depicted in the following words: "when thou camest marching out of the plains of Edom, earth trembled; heaven quaked; the clouds streamed down in torrents." The war God and the storm God are one. Although I am not familiar with the Islamic sources, presumably the same cavalier attitude prevails in those sections as well.

Inattention in these small matters betokens similar laxity in greater issues. For example, in her discussion of the religious thought of Isaac Newton, Armstrong tells us that he "had no time for mystery, which he equated with ignorance and superstition." Newton's discontent with conventional trinitarian theology—he professed Arianism, the belief that Jesus is not co-equal with God the Father—became an "obsession" to "purge this mumbo jumbo from the Christian faith," evidenced in his extensive theological writings. Unfortunately, Armstrong barely mentions Newton's obsession with the Book of Revelation, which led him to scrutinize the events of the day for the playing out of the end times in history, hardly the leisure pursuit of a dedicated purger of "mumbo jumbo." Even more to the point, recent studies have shown that Newton spent years attempting to perfect alchemy and conjure angels—the selfsame years he spent composing the *Principia Mathematica*. At the very worst, this demonstrates that seventeenth-century rationalism was not the same thing as twentieth-century rationalism, an observation easily lost in Armstrong's shuffle.

Armstrong's utter lack of sympathy with the reformed tradition leads her to some even greater sloppiness. She describes the great American religious figure Jonathan Edwards as nothing more than a "hellfire preacher." While this overlooks Edwards's extensive theological writings—running to some ten volumes in the Yale University Press edition—Armstrong doesn't even manage to get his career as a revivalist right. She mistakes Edwards's 1734 revival in his Northampton, Massachusetts, parish—commemorated in his *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1737) and occasioned by a dry sermon series on the topic of justification by faith alone, rather than by any mention of fire and brimstone—for the 1740–1743 national revival ushered in by the tours of evangelist George Whitefield. Armstrong further describes the "tragic finale" of the revival as the inevitable result of a God "who revealed himself in such abnormality and distress" and who was "just as frightening and arbitrary in his dealings with his people as ever." Although there was a tragic incident at the end of the Northampton

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revival—the suicide of Edwards's uncle—the only remotely tragic outgrowth of the national awakening, to the best of my knowledge, was the American Revolution. Moreover, Armstrong ignores both Edwards's own testimony as to the lasting religious comfort that grew from both revivals and the fact that, even though the form may not have been acceptable to her, many people found a direct sense of the "inward sweet delight" of divine things as a result of their revival experience.

Perhaps the most distasteful aspect of *A History of God* lies not in its content, however, but in its chirpily condescending tone. Armstrong falls into the very trap she derides in others: she seeks to remake the deity into a form that would suit her personal needs, having, as she confides on several occasions, discarded the Catholicism of her childhood. In the process, she diminishes the beliefs of those who would seek to live within the confines of a traditional faith and particularly those who find in the doctrines of sin and redemption through grace—the radical otherness of God—a path through this fallen and tragic world. The late Sydney Ahlstrom, the distinguished historian of American religion at Yale, used to say that people should always discuss religion as if a practicing member of every denomination were in the room. This, rather than a search for self, ought to inform any serious study of comparative religion. Or, to resort to Scripture (1 Corinthians 12:4-7): "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are varieties of service, but the same Lord. There are many forms of work, but all of them, in all men, are the work of the same God. In each of us the Spirit is manifested in one particular way, for some useful purpose."

Shorter notices

Iris Murdoch The Green Knight.
Viking, 472 pages, $23.95

In a recent interview, Iris Murdoch reported that she regards her latest novels as her best because they most closely resemble the novels of the nineteenth-century English and Russian masters. I think she is quite correct in that judgment. Certainly her novels of the past decade, *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983), *The Good Apprentice* (1985), *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987), and *The Message to the Planet* (1989), along with her new novel, *The Green Knight*, represent her most ambitious work. Reading these novels can indeed sometimes approach the experience that a character in her *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980) reports while reading *Little Dorrit*: "[I]t was amazing, it was so crammed and chaotic, and yet so touching, a kind of miracle, a strangely naked display of feeling, and full of profound ideas, yet one felt it was all true!"

Murdoch's mature novels, which date from *The Nice and the Good* (1968), are moral tales of the English educated classes that in most cases imitate the structures of Shakespearean comedy and romance. And the novels of the past decade are also portraits of powerful "magicians" in the form of extraordinary artists and philosophers. *The Green Knight* is not entirely a modern reworking of themes and characters found in the medieval English poem about Sir Gawain, but one of the chief characters of the novel, Peter Mir, does correspond in important respects to the powerful and magical Green Knight. To criticize the lack of realism in a novel with significant parallels to this medieval romance, as certain British reviewers have done, requires impressive inattention to the expectations that accompany specific literary models.

In *The Green Knight* Murdoch actually depicts two extraordinary "magicians," one good and one evil. Peter Mir, a solitary Jewish psychoanalyst, is the good magician; Lucas Graffe, "a quiet reclusive academic, a much respected historian," is the evil one. At the center of the novel is a protracted contest between these two that has important correspondences to its medieval counterpart. The first scene of this contest takes place before the time of the novel: Peter Mir intervenes when, late one summer's evening,

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he accidentally encounters Lucas Graffe attempting to murder his brother, Clement Graffe; Lucas, wielding a baseball bat, turns his attack on Mir, felling him with a near-fatal blow to the head. In the course of the novel Mir seeks personal rather than legal retribution against Lucas, since the injuries that Lucas inflicted have produced in Mir a critical loss of memory, a loss that he can sense but cannot name and that prevents him from the practice of his profession. Eventually, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the thirst for retribution gives way to mercy.

In one of the early scenes between Mir and Lucas, Mir, lately out of the hospital, reveals that he is alone in the world, and that he would like to meet the small group of people who make up the ordered social world in which Lucas is the reigning figure. Mir explains: "I want to get to know you all, I want to become part of your family. . . . What I want, if I may be blunt, is *love*." Throughout these meetings with Lucas, Mir's petitions for love alternate with demands for retribution, even death. When Mir tells Lucas that "your just punishment would seem to be the reception of a blow upon the head delivered with equal force," this is not only a precise imitation of the challenge posed by the Green Knight to Sir Gawain but also an indication that in his demand for justice Mir remains as primitive and vengeful as Lucas. Mir tells Lucas: "I would like to send you to hell." To which Lucas replies: "My dear, I live in hell, and have done so since I was a small child."

Marriages and moral and spiritual rebirth are traditional conclusions in the comedies and romances of Shakespeare, and it is not surprising that *The Green Knight* ends with a section in which reconciliation triumphs and marriages (some highly improbable) are contracted all around. Yet the emotional expectations of certainty and consolation that accompany Shakespearean comedy and romance here go unfulfilled. This is one source of the real dissatisfaction one feels upon reading the final pages of this so often impressive novel. Even granted the medieval and renaissance literary models upon which Murdoch is drawing, it is difficult not to feel that the characters of *The Green Knight*, unlike those of Shakespeare, reflect too much the enchantment of literary patterns.

Another dissatisfaction comes from a decision which is clearly intentional: as a philosopher, Murdoch simply wishes to leave her reader with numerous uncertainties. One character bids farewell to another with the final words of Virgil to Dante in the *Purgatorio*: "Do not expect any word or sign from me. Your will is free, upright, and sound, it would be wrong not to be ruled by its good sense. And so, master of yourself, I crown you and I mitre you." This at least is a dissatisfaction that honors the reader.

—*Alan Rutenberg*

Patrick Marnham
The Man Who Wasn't Maigret:
A Portrait of Georges Simenon.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
346 pages, $25

By any standard, the Belgian Georges Simenon is the most successful novelist in history—author of nearly four hundred titles which have sold five hundred million copies in fifty-five languages worldwide. Yet probably few Americans under forty have ever heard of him. In the days when French was studied by more American high-school and college students than it is today, Simenon's novels—which never employed a vocabulary larger than two thousand words—were a wonderful discovery for the student, blessed relief from exercises about *la plume de ma tante*.

But they were not just easy to read; they were fun, and they cast light on certain details of French life that language textbooks preferred to avoid. As Marnham points out, the appeal of Simenon's novels comes largely from their atmosphere: "Cheap . . . and luxury hotels, the power of political influence over justice, the power of social snobbery, the casual introduction of sex and the strongly cinematic nature of the descriptions

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of town life in general and port scenes in particular." Thus drawn in by the *mise en scène*, one was encouraged to soldier on with grammar, sentence structure, even to face those infernal partitives "*y*" and "*en*."

Simenon's special skill was honed from early experiences as a police reporter in his native Liège. "He knew," Marnham writes, "to what extent the *fait divers*, the brief news item, illuminated the unsuspected lives of ordinary people." On the slightest shred of information he could build complicated, arresting narratives in a number of different genres—*romans populaires*, *romans galants*, *romans durs*, and, above all, *romans policieres* featuring the remarkable Inspector Maigret.

In this biography—it is certainly much more than a "portrait"—we now get a look behind the scenes of a hugely successful writer's life. Some of the details are fascinating for anyone who writes or hopes to write. Simenon did not consider himself a "writer" at all; he just wrote, every day of his life. He regarded the producing of novels as a business just like the elaboration of cheese or the manufacture of ball-bearings, and he displayed an acute interest in marketing and contracts, often acting as his own agent. He was phenomenally productive—never producing fewer than four novels a year, and in 1928, a bumper crop of *forty-four*. By the late Twenties he was earning more than any other writer in France, and could live in palatial châteaux and vacation in far-off places like Tahiti.

He weathered World War II nicely in his rural home, performing some minimal civic functions which were later (and probably not quite justifiably) construed as collaboration with the Vichy regime. In the event, after the war he resettled his family in Canada and then the United States, returning to France in 1955 and settling shortly thereafter in Lausanne, where he died in 1989 at the ripe age of eighty-six.

Simenon was evidently a man of enormous vitality, sexual as well as literary. Sometime before his death he confessed to having had sexual relations with more than ten thousand women. Such claims are, evidently, impossible to document, but his biographer has uncovered plenty of sordid material, built around multiple marriages and persistent infidelities. Its overall effect on the reader is not one of shock but of boredom—boredom combined with a lack of sympathy for all parties involved. One wishes, indeed, that Marnham had not gone into such detail about this aspect of Simenon's life, as it adds many more pages to what might otherwise have been a more tightly written and therefore more arresting book. One hopes, however, that this biography will provoke a renewed interest in Simenon's novels, encouraging those with two years of college French to plunge into Maigret's world.

—Mark Falcoff

David Bordwell
The Cinema of Eisenstein.
Harvard University Press,
316 pages, $65; $29.95 paper

Was the Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein a toady of the regime or an artistic genius? The question is debated by the zeks in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. They are well informed about the scene in *The Battleship Potemkin*, the best known of Eisenstein's films, where the sailors mutiny over rotten meat. The zeks wouldn't mind being offered that meat in their Gulag prison.

Eisenstein died in 1948, at the outset of the Cold War. Since then, Western film studies, strongly influenced by Soviet sympathizers, some of whom attended Eisenstein's lectures in Moscow in the 1930s, have turned him into a mythic figure. At the Brussels World Fair in 1958, film critics named *Potemkin* the best film of all time. Many books have appeared that contribute to this mythic aura.

In *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, David Bordwell, a professor of film studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, quotes the zeks' argument in *Ivan Denisovich* but does not pursue it. Instead, he presents Eisenstein

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as an intellectual giant, if not quite the Aristotle of film theory, then its Leonardo, one whose ideas will occupy scholars "for decades to come." While acknowledging that some may consider the Russian "a morally compromised political servant," Bordwell makes no serious attempt to appraise Eisenstein's role outside of the myth. He devotes one chapter to a brief account of his life and another (much briefer) to the myth-making process itself, but his interest and sympathies lie in discussing Eisenstein's theories about film and filmmaking, not in questioning the myth.

The book is a learned and detailed contribution to a field that has become a cottage industry in academia, though how much longer Eisenstein and his contemporaries in the Soviet film world can be approached in this manner is an open question. Eisenstein's output of films was not large. With the possible exception of *Alexander Nevsky*, they were not popular with the masses inside or outside the Soviet Union. Cinéastes have always exaggerated their importance, often for their own purposes. Bordwell is certainly aware of the all-consuming political context in which Soviet artists, filmmakers most of all, had to work, but in choosing to focus on visual semantics and controversies, he brings us shadows, not substance.

Eisenstein survived the decades of Stalinist terror by self-abasement, ideological conformity, and compliance in all demands made of him—directing a Wagner opera when the regime favored the Nazis and a patriotic Russian thirteenth-century epic when it didn't. He proposed a film about the building of waterways with forced labor and made one that portrayed Stalin as Tsar Ivan the Terrible ("that vile political idea—the justification of personal tyranny," says one of Solzhenitsyn's zeks). He traveled in Europe, probably under Willi Münzenberg's auspices, charming many in the film world and recruiting some of the younger ones for his film school in Moscow. He even reached Hollywood and shot scenes in Mexico for a film he was unable to complete before being ordered home.

Bordwell tells us that Eisenstein took a lively interest in fashioning his own myth and he warns us that much remains unknown about his life and thoughts—his diaries, for example, "are currently inaccessible." Much remains to be told, also, about the way images from Eisenstein's films were recycled in the West in documentaries purporting to be about the Bolshevik revolution, the scene of the storming of the Winter Palace from *October* being the most notable example. Eisenstein's work needs to be understood as part of the history of propaganda; it had its place in the application of Lenin's dogma of agitation to the film medium. Now that the Cold War is over, the opportunity for undertaking such a study is there.

Ivor Montagu, one of those involved in Eisenstein's visit to the West in 1930, tells the story of a lecture Eisenstein gave at the University of Southern California. Next day, Eisenstein was greeted by two ladies who told him how interesting they had found the lecture. But it was a pity, they said, that it had not been given in English. In fact, reported Montagu, Eisenstein had spoken in linguistically correct English, but his lecture had been unintelligible to them because of its technical jargon.

A similar opacity afflicts film studies of the kind typified by this book. Characteristic of its insider style are sentences like these: "Eisenstein displays a tendency toward what we might call an exhaustive variation of parameters. Everything in the polyphonic weave must be prepared for, by subtle gradations and careful balancings of forces." And, more ominously for those not members of the cult: "By virtue of his eclectic interests and divagative reasoning strategies, we ought not to expect Eisenstein's writing to exhibit a strictly rational structure." Bordwell should try telling that to the zeks!

—Jeremy Murray-Brown

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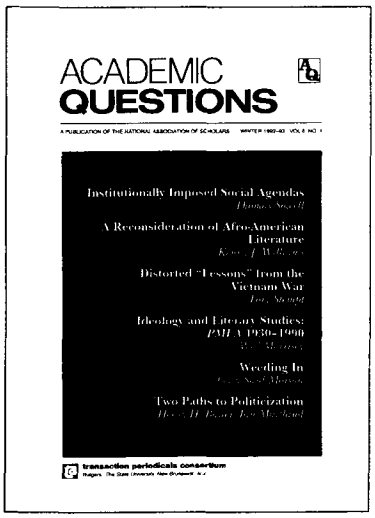

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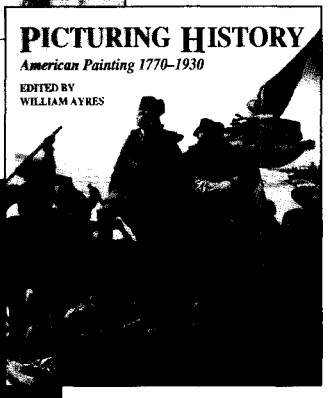

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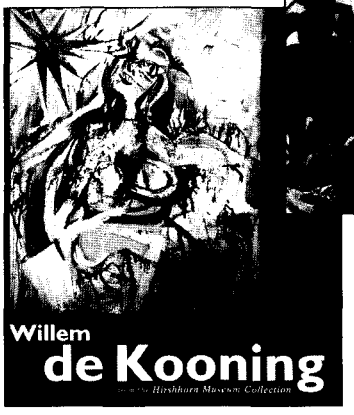

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